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The CHICHESTER INTRIGUE

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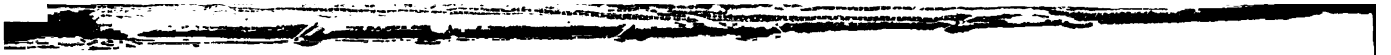

THE CHICHESTER INTRIGUE

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THE FRIENDSHIPS OF VERONICA
SEVERANCE
A MAN OF SENTIMENT
SCRUPLES
A SENTIMENTAL SEASON
ETC., ETC., ETC.

THE CHICHESTER INTRIGUE

BY

THOMAS COBB

L.C.

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THE CHICHESTER INTRIGUE

CHAPTER I

THE METAL BOX

MR. LAMBERT AMORY stepped from a hansom at a house in Manchester Street one April afternoon, unbuttoned his frock coat and took out a latch-key from his waistcoat pocket, but after a doubtful glance at the oblong, metal uniform case on the roof of the cab, he put the key back again and rang the bell.

"Just see to that box, Diggle," he said to the stout, middle-aged man who opened the door.

Lambert Amory had occupied the two rooms on the ground floor for the last three or four years, gradually replacing Diggle's furniture until the contents were almost all his own property.

NYPL

A substantial, black oak, leather-topped writing-table stood between the two windows, the opposite wall being entirely hidden by well-filled book-shelves, whilst there hung, on each side of the fire-place, several curious old engravings in narrow black frames. The general aspect of the room was scrupulously neat; nothing appeared out of its proper place; not a speck of dust could be seen, and Lambert seemed to harmonise with his sur-roundings.

Slightly above the middle height, with unusually high shoulders, he did not carry an ounce of super-fluous flesh. His cleanly-shaven face was broad at the forehead and somewhat short at the chin, and this tendency to roundness, together with a bland, ingenuous expression, made him look younger than his thirty-two years. He had straight dark hair, always short, with strongly-marked eyebrows and a healthy fresh complexion.

Standing with his back to the fire, for the weather was still cool, Lambert gazed at the metal box which Diggle had placed on the sofa, little sus-pecting as yet the perplexity that its contents were destined to create.

Lambert's friend, Alfred Chichester, if not the most inspired actor on the English stage, was re-

puted the handsomest. He had been at the same preparatory school as Amory, whom he had preceded to Harrow, but after a long intimacy, a coolness had arisen, dating from about the period of Chichester's separation from his wife.

Nevertheless, it was to Lambert that he turned at the pinch, the fact being that, with a multitude of acquaintances, Chichester had few friends. He had been in poor health for some months, and intending to return in time to fill his part at the theatre on Monday evening, set out on the Sunday before last to Boulogne, where he was stricken by what proved his fatal illness.

The following day Lambert received a telegram summoning him to Chichester's side, where he stayed until the end, afterwards accompanying the body to England, and the day previous to his arrival in Manchester Street with the metal box, Amory had stood amongst a large crowd of Chichester's colleagues and others, by the grave in Hampstead Cemetery.

Lambert, on coming down from Cambridge, had turned his hand to journalism. He was already the possessor of a moderate private income and would have admitted, perhaps, that his unequivocal success had been mainly due to a kind

of mischievous, impudent candour in criticism. Nothing was permitted to interfere with at least two holidays a year in Switzerland; he was a member of the Alpine Club, and as well known for his handbooks on mountain climbing as for any of his works.

He had scarcely been ten minutes in his room this afternoon, when another hansom stopped at the door, and a few moments later Diggle announced:

"Sir Hugo Warbrook."

Hugo, also, had been a schoolfellow of Alfred Chichester, from whom, however, he had drifted farther and farther. Two years younger than Amory, five years younger than the third member of what had once been an intimate trio, Hugo was well over six feet in height, with a long neck, wide, sloping shoulders, and loose limbs.

His fair hair barely escaped redness, his long face was freely freckled, and he wore a somewhat stiff-looking moustache. Sir Hugo's cordial, expansive manner offered a striking contrast to Lambert's conspicuously cool self-possession.

Amory held out a hand without a smile, Warbrook gripping it effusively.

"I didn't get half a chance of a word at the

funeral yesterday," he exclaimed. "Poor old Chich! I remember him the first day I went to Burton's as if it were only last week!"

Without an invitation, Hugo helped himself to a cigarette from the large box which always might be found in the same place, between the black marble clock and one of the bronze candlesticks on the mantelshelf.

"How about Marion?" he inquired, striking a match. They used both to see much of Mrs. Chichester during the days of her earlier married life.

"She and the kids were present at the end," answered Lambert.

"Is she decently provided for?" cried Hugo, flinging himself into an arm-chair and stretching out his long legs.

"None too well!"

"Poor old Chich must have made a good deal," suggested Warbrook.

"And he spent a good deal," said Lambert. "There's the houseful of furniture up by Fitzjohn's Avenue, one or two copyrights that are not worth much from any point of view, and so forth. Of course," added Amory, "you know I am the executor—no end of a bore."

"Does that signify that the will was made only just before he died?" asked Hugo.

"Two days, and he required no end of persuasion. Chichester didn't seem able to realise that the curtain was coming down. I got him to let me send for Marion and the boys, and he signed a short will which I drew up in her favour. She has the notion that his life may have been insured."

"Haven't you found a policy?" asked Hugo.

"I have been at the house almost all the morning," said Lambert, "looking through his papers—a rare heap of them; far too many," he added significantly. "I grew sick of it at last and bundled what were left into that box." Lambert nodded in the direction of the uniform case on the sofa. "Then," he continued, "after getting some luncheon, I went on to the theatre and found some fresh papers there. I shall finish the job before I sleep."

"A rather thankless one," suggested Hugo.

"The women, amongst them," returned Lambert, "did their best to spoil the fellow."

Turning to the mantelshelf, he took a cigarette, whilst Hugo throwing away the end of his seemed to become suddenly restless. He sat more erect

in the arm-chair, he fidgetted his feet, and his face grew redder than ever.

"I am dining with Lady Appleton," he remarked, rather abruptly. "Edna Thornhill is going."

"Aren't you by way of meeting Miss Thornhill pretty often?"

"Give me another cigarette, old man!" cried Hugo.

"Anyhow," said Lambert, handing the box, "she's a charming girl."

Hugo struck a match before he answered, then slowly lifted his tall figure out of the chair and stood resting against the table.

"She's more than that, my dear fellow," he exclaimed, with the solemnity which occasionally characterised him.

"Is it possible?" asked Lambert.

"Yes, it is," answered Hugo, with considerable enthusiasm, as he looked straight into Amory's eyes.

The name of Warbrook, as Hugo had found to his cost at school, was widely known in connection with a certain tooth-powder, so that it was scarcely possible to walk along any street in London or the larger provincial towns, without being

reminded that there was nothing like "Warbrook's Dentifrice" for the preservation of the teeth and gums.

Hugo's father having amassed a large fortune by its manufacture and advertisement had in due course become Member for Paulhampton. Being a generous and uninquisitive contributor to the party funds, he had presently been rewarded by a baronetcy; the business was turned into a company, and as Sir William had been long a widower and Hugo was an only child, a large batch of shares passed into his hands.

Moreover, he had on Sir William's death a year or two ago, succeeded him in the representation of Paulhampton; but whereas Sir William had taken only a perfunctory interest in the affairs of the nation, Hugo soon became the self-appointed advocate of every person or community in distress. He was, in fact, actuated by a perfectly sincere desire for the welfare of his fellow creatures—not in this world only.

"The fact is," he said, "I—well, I have had a kind of revelation."

"Concerning Miss Thornhill?" suggested Lambert, with an impassive face.

"Yes, about Edna Thornhill. Of course," con-

tinued Hugo, "I have never had any doubt about one thing. I always knew she was, as you say, a charming girl. But a man stipulates for rather more than that, you understand——"

"When he goes through what he would describe as falling in love," retorted Lambert, "he usually fancies he has got it."

"You have heard me speak of Agatha Brownlow?" said Hugo.

"Once or twice."

"What a splendid woman!" cried Hugo, enthusiastically. "Well," he explained, "a few months ago she rented a house in Ashbourne Street, King's Cross, turned it into a Rescue Home, went to live there, kept the door open day and night. She was doing magnificent work, when the landlord raised an objection. He threatened to eject Agatha if she didn't conduct the place in what he considered a proper manner."

"My fault, no doubt," said Lambert; "but I don't quite see where Miss Thornhill comes in."

"You will, if you wait a bit," continued Hugo, sitting down again. "I saw Agatha the day before yesterday. Now," he demanded, looking up at Lambert, as he stood imperturbably smoking with

his back to the fire, "how do you imagine she had got over her difficulty? You would never guess."

"Then I'll give it up at once."

"Well, Agatha, it seems, was introduced to Edna Thornhill a few months ago at some concert and the two took a fancy to each other. Birds of a feather, you know, old chap——"

"But are they?" asked Lambert, raising his eyebrows.

"Anyhow," cried Hugo, "Edna has come to Agatha's relief. You understand, she has a little money—not very much—of her own. She approached the landlord, bought the lease of his house at a ridiculously high price, and turned it over rent free to Agatha. More than that," Hugo added: "Edna goes to Ashbourne Street once or twice a week, and Agatha says that her influence over the women is marvellous."

"A curious whim for that kind of girl," said Lambert.

"Ah, but, my dear fellow," exclaimed Hugo, "that is exactly my point."

"What is?" demanded Lambert.

"Why, Edna is not the kind of a girl you imagined her to be——"

"For that matter," said Lambert, "I doubt

whether I have spoken a dozen words to Miss Thornhill in my life."

"She is of a totally different kind," cried Hugo, "and infinitely better."

"Well, so that you're satisfied," returned Lambert. "Do you mind," he added, as Hugo rose and began to look about for his hat, "giving me a lift with this confounded box?"

Walking round to the sofa at the other side of the room, they each took a handle, lifting the uniform case on to the table.

"My work is cut out for the rest of the day," said Lambert, taking a small brass key from his waistcoat pocket. Inserting it in the lock, he raised the lid, exposing a number of miscellaneous papers, which filled it to the brim. "Marion," he explained, "is immensely anxious to know whether there's a Life Assurance policy."

"I wish her luck," returned Hugo, going into the hall, Lambert following him to the street door. They stood there a few minutes, when Hugo walked away and Lambert returned to his sitting-room. Drawing a chair to the table, with every appearance of disinclination, he sat down and began to attack the contents of the box, which had formerly been used to hold some of Chichester's proper-

ties. Nor did Lambert rise from his chair until Diggle came to prepare the table for dinner.

"You can lay the cloth on the writing table," he suggested; and standing on the hearth-rug he thrust his hands into his trousers' pockets while he gazed reflectively at the litter of papers until his meal was ready.

CHAPTER II

MISS EDNA THORNHILL

SIR HUGO WARBROOK, on leaving Manchester Street, walked slowly to the house in Bryanston Square, where he had continued to dwell since his father's death: for one reason because he could not bring himself to dismiss the servants, many of whom had lived with Sir William for years; for another, that he looked forward in the natural order of things some day to marry, when he should prefer to live here rather than elsewhere. Sir Hugo was not a man who changed easily.

Nor did his position with regard to Edna Thornhill appear in the least equivocal from his own standpoint. It may have been that, quite unconsciously, he had a disposition to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. For whilst he naturally stipulated for youth, health and beauty in the woman who should become his wife, together no doubt with that charming vivacity of manner which

is best attained "in the world," Hugo was extremely insistent that she should not be "of the world."

He knew many beautiful women whom he could never dream of marrying, and he knew many who were supremely good, towards whom (such is the weakness of the flesh) he felt the reverse of attraction. But a serious doubt concerning Edna Thornhill had been almost set at rest by Miss Brownlow, so that having hitherto striven to put a curb upon his feelings, there now appeared very little reason why he should not give them a free rein. The consequence was that he tied his white necktie with additional care this evening, and set out to Lady Appleton's house in exuberantly high spirits.

As it happened, Edna was standing on the doorstep with her mother as Hugo stepped out of his hansom, and whilst Mrs. Thornhill greeted him with the cordiality due to a wealthy man who might conceivably some day become her son-in-law, Edna bent her neck in her quick, friendly manner as she entered the hall.

Hugo (being in love) told himself there was nothing hard or merely glittering about the brightness which he found so enticing; it might indeed be compared to the peaceful ripple of sunny sum-

mer seas. She wore nothing but white this evening; a long cloak reached to her shoes, and around her neck was a fluffy, feathery arrangement to match, than which nothing could possibly have been more becoming. Hugo reached the drawing-room before Mrs. Thornhill and her daughter, hastening in fact for the pleasure of seeing her enter. Hugo was very much in love indeed, although his exacting principles might serve to check his ardour.

He stood watching as she swept into the room in her mother's wake, and remarked (not for the first time) that her rather tall figure and dignified carriage were piquantly at variance with the benign expression of her brown eyes. Now that her cloak had been removed, she remained still a vision in white, scarcely looking her age, which must certainly be about twenty-two.

Hugo flushed uncomfortably when Lady Appleton came to tell him he was to take Edna down to dinner.

"By the way," he said, when he had crossed the room to her side, "I happened to see a friend of yours the day before yesterday."

"One has so many, Sir Hugo!"

"Do you really mean that?" he asked, bending over her.

"Oh, well, I certainly hope that I have," said Edna.

"For my own part," he continued, in his more solemn manner, "I regard a true friend as one of the rarest and best gifts of heaven."

"Which of my particular gifts," she demanded, "did you see the day before yesterday?"

"Agatha Brownlow," said Hugo, as the host led his partner out of the room.

Edna put a hand on his arm, and they went downstairs together.

"The fact is," said Hugo, as soon as they were seated, "your virtues have found you out."

"One is so often not at home to them," answered Edna.

"I am not to be put off the scent," he persisted. "I have undergone a great enlightenment; I am at last beginning to understand you."

"Oh, Sir Hugo," she said, "I wish you would be kind enough to give me the clue."

"Do you find it very difficult?"

"To imagine to-day how one could possibly have committed the acts of yesterday!"

She seemed to make one of her delightful alternations from gay to grave, and, on the whole,

Hugo felt deeper sympathy with her more serious mood.

"Still," he urged, "if it is human to err, it is surely divine to help the erring."

"So Agatha," she said, "has been shabby enough to give me away."

"Upon my word," returned Hugo, "you have not the slightest reason to feel ashamed or even embarrassed——"

"Oh, but I am afraid I have! There's the consciousness that one is sailing under false colours."

"Hitherto," he said, "you have taken the most excellent care never to let me see the real ones."

"Well, there is a proverb which I should like you to remember now," cried Edna.

"I vow it shall never be forgotten," said Hugo.

"One swallow does not make a summer."

"Anyhow," he insisted, "it may quite safely be taken as a harbinger of spring."

"But nothing in the world," she retorted, "is so wearisome as talk about the weather. If you wouldn't really very much mind," she added, "we will make a point of avoiding it in future."

It was Mrs. Thornhill whose remark drew Edna none too soon into the general conversation of the table. Mrs. Thornhill had been agreeably told

that she was the youngest-looking grandmother in London; but although she felt perfectly willing to see her younger daughter also married, she considered that Sir Hugo Warbrook was monopolising Edna a little too openly. Mrs. Thornhill was shorter than her daughter, with fairer hair, still without a trace of grey. She had a slim figure and dressed with almost conspicuous simplicity; her good nature being of such an overflowing description that she found it difficult to meet the eyes even of a stranger without a smile. She had vainly tried to meet Edna's once or twice this evening, to glance a hint to mend her ways. But Edna had this habit of dropping into a tête-à-tête; she could talk more freely to one than to many.

Sir Hugo, unable to get in another word, rejoiced when the time at last came for Lady Appleton to withdraw, and then he sat with a bored expression until the men had finished their cigarettes and the host made a move. In the drawing-room Hugo took the first opportunity of going to Edna's side.

"I saw in the newspaper that you went to Mr. Chichester's funeral yesterday," she remarked.

"Oh, ah yes," was the answer; "my friend Amory is his executor, you know."

"I read that in the newspaper also," said Edna. "Is it a great responsibility?" she asked, with her eyes on Hugo's face. He wished she would keep them there.

"I left the poor chap," he explained, "with a whole trunkful of papers to look through; enough to last far into the night."

"Surely," she cried, "Mr. Amory would not be obliged to read them all?"

"You see," Hugo returned, "Mrs. Chichester is left none too well off and the question to be answered is whether Chichester's life was insured."

"But still to have to wade through scores of uninteresting papers—letters and things, I suppose?" she suggested.

"You scarcely know Amory," said Hugo.

"One meets him as seldom as one used to meet you last season."

"Anyhow," exclaimed Hugo, "if he takes a thing in hand he generally does it pretty thoroughly. He grumbles but he acts."

"I never miss his weekly *causerie* in the *Parthenon*," said Edna.

"For that matter," continued Hugo, "very few people do know Amory."

"In the sense of understanding, you mean?"

"Why, yes."

"Has his character such unplumbable depths?"

"Oh, well," said Hugo, "he really seems to see all the world as a stage, you know, and all the men and women merely as players. I imagine," added Hugo, who would probably have refrained from such criticism in any other ears, "he regards his point of view as a humorous one."

"An onlooker at life!" suggested Edna.

"You see, he rather prides himself on looking at everything and everybody with what he calls detachment. His attitude is supposed to be entirely intellectual."

"And necessarily unsympathetic?"

"At least," said Hugo, with a laugh, "he would go many hundred miles out of his way rather than betray a shadow of feeling—although he would call it sentimentality."

"I wonder," returned Edna, "whether you realise what a very cold-blooded person you are picturing?"

"If he were not more than that," said Hugo, "he would scarcely have been sent for at the pinch by Chichester."

"And Mr. Amory went!" was the answer.

"Growling all the way, no doubt. He must have

found the whole thing the most fearful bore. No man more intensely hates the sight of illness. One cannot," added Hugo, more solemnly, "imagine him at a deathbed. He prefers to——"

"To pass by on the other side?"

"Well, his creed certainly seems to involve leaving things alone."

"How often," cried Edna, "one wishes it were more common!"

Hugo leaned forward to obtain a better view of her face.

"Surely," he urged, "there are times when it becomes almost criminal——"

"To stand and wait?"

"Happily," said Hugo, "you don't practise what you preach."

"I am not fond of preaching," she murmured.

"Amory," he explained, "has such a sublime faith in the survival of the fittest that he seems contented to fold his hands, but there's no question in my mind," Hugo added, "that we ought all to put our shoulders to the wheel."

Someone at this point was beginning to sing, and Edna soon afterwards received a hint that it was time to accompany Mrs. Thornhill home. If Hugo could at that moment have peeped into Lam-

bert's sitting-room in Manchester Street, he would doubtless have felt some astonishment at his friend's demeanour. It would not in the least degree have accorded with the description which he had been giving to Edna Thornhill.

Hugo would have seen Lambert suddenly start from his chair without the slightest apparent cause.

"The devil!" Hugo would have heard him exclaim.

CHAPTER III

THE LETTERS

LAMBERT AMORY had sat down to dinner with his mind still undisturbed. The space on the writing table was a little cramped, but a vase of flowers stood on one side and on the other a copy of the *Fortnightly Review* was propped up by a tumbler.

Lambert always left the ordering of his meals to Mrs. Diggle, who understood her lodger's tastes and her own interests. He did not, however, spend much time at dinner this evening; and smoking a cigarette with his coffee afterwards, his eyes soon turned to the littered table in the middle of the room. Rising presently, he sighed faintly, and began again upon Chichester's papers.

In the first place, Lambert had turned out the entire contents of the box on to the cloth and before dinner had already gone through a considerable portion of them, replacing various items in a more

orderly manner: old play bills, press cuttings, photographs, and other trifles.

Amongst the rest, however, he had come across certain effusions which might conceivably have proved prolific disturbers of domestic tranquillity. Chichester had sometimes in Lambert's presence hinted at these tributes of admiration, and Amory had wondered what kind of women the writers could be. A single glance had been enough to make him lay such letters aside with the ultimate intention of putting them in the fire.

Without a thought as to the legality of the process, he was determined that they should not come under Marion Chichester's notice; she had suffered enough during her husband's lifetime without being further wounded after his death. Either from mere curiosity, or from some other motive, she had seemed eager to spare Lambert the trouble of the present search, suggesting, indeed, that the whole bulk of the papers should be handed to her as they were found.

But Lambert had his own way of doing things and now felt glad he had not shirked the task. It was not that he had the slightest inclination to set himself up as the judge of Alfred Chichester or of anyone else in the world: his intention being at

present not to blame the husband, but to spare the wife.

Soon after he had resumed the examination, Lambert saw a letter written on thick, white paper, dated from a well-known circulating library, and signed by the one word: "Edna." Now the name struck him as by no means an uncommon one and at first he did not associate it with Miss Thornhill, of whom a few hours earlier Hugo had been enthusiastically talking. But as Lambert continued to examine paper after paper, he found others bearing the same signature; the handwriting was large and distinct and he had been on the point of relegating the series to the small pile destined for the flames, when his attention became suddenly arrested.

"The devil!" exclaimed Lambert, starting from his chair, for on the top of one of the same writer's letters, on grey paper this time, he caught a glimpse of an embossed address: "7 Grandison Street, Mayfair."

As he stood gazing at the table, the door opened and Diggle entered the room.

"Is there anything else to-night, sir?" he asked, and taking his watch from his pocket, Lambert was astonished to find it so late.

"No, nothing else, Diggle," he answered.

"Shall I put on some more coal, sir?"

"Ah, yes, you might," said Lambert, certainly feeling little inclination to go to bed just yet. Having put on the coal and stirred the fire, Diggle left Lambert alone, and sitting down once more, he went methodically to work until he had examined every scrap of paper the box contained. He closed the lid, turned the key in the lock, and lifted it from the table back to the sofa; then taking the letters set aside for destruction, with the exception of "Edna's," he drew a chair close to the fender and committed them to the flames.

The house was by this time silent; outside in the quiet backwater of a street, an occasional hansom passed, the driver bent on cutting off a corner. Leaning back in his chair, Lambert now took the remaining letters; and instead of feeling disposed, as in the other cases, to see as little as possible of what had been intended, certainly, only for Alfred Chichester's eyes, he had become eager to make the most exhaustive examination. Although only one or two of the letters were dated, there were other circumstances which enabled him to arrange them in probable order.

They appeared gradually but steadily to increase

in intensity, and having sorted them to the best of his ability, Lambert began to read them carefully through. They had, he gathered, been written about five years ago, and all within a period of a few months. Human documents, he told himself. He held in his hands the more or less complete record of a romance—at least of an intrigue.

The first letter was little more than an ingenuous and apparently spontaneous gush of admiration for Chichester's acting; this had evidently been answered and then "Edna" wrote a second time, enclosing a photograph (which had not been found in the box) and expressing herself with warmer ardour. These were followed by other letters containing references to what had doubtless been Chichester's requests for a meeting; it seemed as if he had been urging some course to which his correspondent was reluctant to consent.

Such objections, at first forcible, grew subsequently fainter and fainter, until presently she threw off restraint; the letters became almost passionate in their fervour; there were hints at an approaching journey to Brighton, and Lambert, reading between the lines, concluded that Chichester had proposed that she should return to London twenty-

four hours before she was expected, breaking the journey at Redhill.

Two or three letters were devoted chiefly to a discussion of this suggestion: Edna recapitulating what seemed to have been his plans, still criticising them, but scarcely any longer with very intense disfavour. She raised difficulties, however, concerning the details: her friends might come to see her off at Brighton station; they would have her luggage properly labelled to Victoria. Then, later, she admitted the feasibility of travelling with all her impedimenta in the compartment, and so the assignation appeared to be made, Alfred Chichester being no doubt "resting" at the time, or he could scarcely have absented himself from the theatre.

There were two letters written from Brighton, both containing references to the approaching meeting; after that, as far as Lambert could gather, came a prolonged silence. Now the tone of her letters, of which only a few remained, was entirely different; Chichester's urgent entreaties for another rendezvous were strenuously resisted. Edna had presumably grown contrite; she wrote with the most bitter self-reproaches, her refusal being as firm as her former ardour had been intense. She should never be able to forgive herself; her humiliation

was overwhelming; she implored him not to write any more; and finally, in one short, determined letter, insisted that she should not call at the library again.

Lambert Amory, leaning forward in his chair, took the poker and stirred the fire into a blaze; then holding the letters one by one over the flames, made certain that every word of writing they contained was destroyed. Although it was by this time past midnight, he had no thought of going to bed. He lighted a cigarette and tried to think the affair calmly over, not without a sense of soreness, inasmuch as it fell to his lot to be bothered in this way. For Lambert foresaw not a little unpleasantness.

That the writer of those incriminating letters had been Miss Edna Thornhill, of No. 7 Grandison Street, Mayfair, could scarcely, it seemed, be questioned. There would not probably be two Ednas at the same address. It was true that Lambert knew little about the family: General Thornhill, a man several years older than his wife, had died four years ago, leaving two daughters, one of whom was already married to Major Robbins; the other, Edna, being at present (according to Hugo Warbrook) about twenty-two years of age.

Although Lambert went little if at all into what Mrs. Thornhill called "society," he had during the last year or two met Edna on more than one occasion, admiring—and surely few men could refrain from admiration—without having exchanged more than a dozen words with her in his life.

Miss Edna Thornhill did not strike him as the type of young woman to pen such letters as he had recently read and destroyed, but then Lambert had lived long enough to know that persons are not always what they seem; that still waters run deep, and so forth. It seemed ludicrous to remember the enthusiasm of Hugo's encomiums, the warmth with which he had dwelt on her participation in Agatha Brownlow's work, his hints at the probability that she might become Lady Warbrook.

How, Lambert asked himself, ought he to act, considering the fact that Hugo was his own familiar friend? Hugo at present had not gone so far as to ask Edna Thornhill to become his wife; he would never dream of asking her if he had a suspicion of the truth. For once in a way, Lambert felt tempted to procrastinate, in spite of his conviction that it would prove infinitely easier to give Hugo a hint before anything of the nature of an engagement could be entered into.

Lambert began to realise that Edna's own sensations at the present time must be far from enviable. She no doubt had either read in the newspapers, or heard from Hugo Warbrook, the name of Alfred Chichester's executor. As long as Chichester was alive, she might regard the letters as perfectly safe even if they had not been destroyed at the time of their receipt; but since his death, surely Miss Thornhill must feel extremely anxious to know what had become of them.

But notwithstanding some sympathy for Edna, Lambert's first consideration must be Hugo. A man of the most exacting character! The last in the world to tolerate any lapse of the kind!

On the other hand, the woman was penitent and in all probability her secret remained hidden from everybody but Lambert himself! Yet he seemed to be required to stand by and witness his friend's betrayal or else to humiliate Edna to the dust. At last, before going to bed in the room on the other side of the folding doors, Lambert thought he perceived a ray of hope. Although Hugo wished to marry Edna Thornhill, it did not necessarily follow that she wished to become his wife. If it should prove that Warbrook had been too confident, the situation would be simplified; and

indeed, Lambert need not trouble himself any more about it. The moral was that he determined to investigate matters for himself, so that at least action might be deferred until he found an opportunity of observing Hugo and Edna Thornhill together.

CHAPTER IV

MARION CHICHESTER

LAMBERT AMORY sat down to breakfast later than usual the following morning, and read the newspaper whilst he ate his omelette. To make up for less sleep than usual, he drank more cups of tea, and afterwards lighting a cigarette, stood with a thoughtful expression on his fresh-looking, ingenuous face, whilst Diggle cleared the table. There was never any time lost over this operation, Lambert usually sitting down to ascertain whether he could work, before half-past nine every morning.

Having a satisfactory private income, he held in contempt those less fortunate persons who wrote whether the spirit moved them or not. For his own part, he often had an unconquerable tendency to indolence, especially on such glorious spring mornings as the present.

"Diggle," he said, "I think the time has come to leave off fires."

"Yes, sir; Mrs. Diggle was saying the same thing half an hour ago," was the answer.

"Mrs. Diggle is always right," exclaimed Lambert, gravely.

Left to himself, he walked to the writing-table, turned the blotting paper in his pad to bring an immaculate sheet uppermost, took out his fountain pen, and sat down; but a quarter of an hour later he rose again and went to the hall. Having carefully brushed his tall hat, he selected a stick, and set out in the direction of Bryanston Square, where at this hour he was almost certain to find Hugo at home.

Later in the day he was somewhat difficult to meet, being a man of multitudinous engagements. He attended a great many public meetings of more or less importance, and never forgot his duty to his Paulhampton constituents. Sir Hugo Warbrook was becoming known, also, as a budding philanthropist, and every morning's post brought a budget of letters, which he treated with attention, making personal investigations concerning their writers and often affording help.

A glance at the interior of his house proved that

he was able to do this without in any way making himself uncomfortable. Every room had an appearance of substantial luxury, and Lambert often came to borrow books from the library which for some occult reason Sir William Warbrook had been at the pains to form. For he had read as little as his son, who did not trouble himself about the more subtle problems of life.

"Well," exclaimed Hugo, "did you get through your job last night?"

"Every bit of it," was the answer.

"Have you found a Life Assurance policy?" asked Hugo, with unmistakable interest.

"No sign of one," said Lambert, who had entirely forgotten this original object of his search.

"Astonishing," remarked Hugo complacently, as he looked down at his table, "what a heap of letters one gets every morning." Then leaning back in his chair, he threw his arms up above his head and luxuriously yawned. "I couldn't get a wink until half-past three," he said.

"As bad as that?" returned Lambert, conscious of duplicity.

"I had the jolliest time, too," continued Hugo. "I was in luck's way from the outset—took Edna in to dinner. By the way," he cried, his tone sug-

gesting good-humoured patronage, "we were talking about you."

"You must have been rather hard up for a subject!" suggested Lambert.

"In your capacity of Chichester's executor," said Hugo. "It's astonishing how interested even the most unlikely people seem to be in anything connected with the stage. Of course," he added, after a momentary pause, "Oswald Sherval is a kind of cousin of yours."

"What about him?"

"Well, the fact is," Hugo admitted in his most confidential tone, "I can't make things out. You see, Sherval goes to Grandison Street once a week as regularly as clock-work; always either on Saturday afternoon or Sunday."

"The only time he gets away from the bank," suggested Lambert.

"And," said Hugo, seriously, "the fellow always sees Edna alone. I happened to drop in the other Saturday; Mrs. Thornhill was upstairs in the drawing-room, and Sherval was with Edna in a little room behind the dining-room—the smoking-room they call it."

Lambert had never, perhaps, felt so deep an interest in this distant cousin before.

"Until the other day," he answered, "Oswald had only eighty pounds a year besides the two hundred he got from his father's estate. But now his salary at the bank has been raised to five hundred at a bound. Old Sherval is his uncle, you understand," said Lambert. "As he is a bachelor and likely to remain one, Oswald stands a good chance of a partnership before long."

"Well," cried Hugo, "I can't understand it. You know how all manner of notions come into a man's head. I have wondered whether there could be any sort of private understanding between the two, and that they were waiting for an improvement in Sherval's position."

"He doesn't bring his confidences to me," said Lambert. "All I can tell you is that old Sherval wanted him to enter the bank when he was eighteen. Oswald swore he never would; he was going in for the law, and then as soon as he was called he made a right-about-face and did what of course he ought to have done four or five years earlier. Old Sherval promised him a good position after two years' strict probation; the time has just ended—hence Oswald's five hundred a year."

"Upon my word!" exclaimed Hugo, "Edna looked wonderful last night—wonderful! I have

never seen anyone else to compare with her. Doesn't some fellow say that the happiest man on earth is the one whose ideal turns out real? Perhaps I don't quote correctly, but you know what I mean. Well," he continued, "that's just how I feel about Edna. I used to tell myself she was all I admired in a woman, and yet I had the sort of idea that she couldn't be for me——"

"Not good enough?" suggested Lambert, drily.

"That makes me seem pretty insufferable, doesn't it?" said Hugo.

"Anyhow," returned Lambert without a blush, "you certainly make me curious to see more of Miss Thornhill."

Hugo rose from his chair with such energy that Lambert thought he was going to grasp his hand. "Are you though, really?" he demanded. "I should immensely like you to know her better. She's interested in those things you do for the *Parthenon,* too."

"Well," said Lambert, "it's for you to put me in the way."

"How about Mrs. Thwaites' ball on Tuesday?" suggested Hugo.

"Are you going?"

"Why, yes; and I know Mrs. Thwaites will be delighted——"

"So shall I if you can work it," answered Lambert, and having undertaken to do all that was necessary, Hugo paid Mrs. Thwaites a visit the same afternoon, afterwards going on from her house to another where it might be possible to meet Edna, about whose movements just now what Hugo Warbrook did not know was scarcely worth knowing.

Seeing her amidst a crowd chiefly made up of her own sex, he presently had the felicity to secure a chair by her side and began to explain that he had come direct from Mrs. Thwaites.

"I went to ask her to send Amory a card for Tuesday," he explained.

"Then will he be at the dance?" asked Edna, with a flushed face which struck Hugo as extremely bewitching.

"Oh, yes, he will be there right enough," was the answer.

"I thought such functions were rather out of Mr. Amory's way," she suggested.

"Well, you see," returned Hugo, "I held out an irresistible inducement."

"I won't pretend not to understand," she cried.

"So you and Mr. Amory had nothing better to do than discuss such an unimportant person as myself!"

"I just happened to say I had met you last night at Lady Appleton's——"

"Was that all—how very disappointing!"

"All I can muster the courage to admit," said Sir Hugo, and then Mrs. Thornhill at the opposite side of the room rose to go home.

Whilst Hugo had been talking to Edna this afternoon, Lambert Amory was standing on his doorstep in Manchester Street watching Diggle lift the metal uniform case on to the roof of a hansom. Having directed the driver to a road near Fitzjohn's Avenue, Lambert took his seat, intending to find out whether the auctioneer was making due preparation for the sale of Alfred Chichester's furniture and effects. It was a beautiful afternoon and the almond trees in the suburban front gardens were in full bloom. On reaching the large red brick house where Chichester had lived during the last few years of his life, Lambert found two clerks making out an inventory, and after the exchange of a few words about the forthcoming sale, he reentered the hansom on his way to Hoyle Road, Brondesbury.

The road, consisting of small, semi-detached houses of varying size and rent, ran parallel with a railway, Marion Chichester's being one of the smallest, with its back to the line. Pushing open the garden gate with some difficulty, one of the pillars having sunk, Lambert rang the bell, waited a few minutes, rang again, and was admitted by Marion in person.

She was in her thirty-third year, twelve months older than her present visitor; a short woman with a well-developed figure and a wasp-like waist. Her black frock fitted like a glove and (perhaps because she knew it to be very becoming) she wore a minute widow's cap. Her hair was between fair and dark; her eyes being blue, with lashes which might have been artificially blackened. She had small, regular features, and purring, half-caressing manners, her whole appearance suggesting an almost aggressive femininity. Beyond question, Marion might yet exercise a dangerous fascination, and being fully aware of her endowments, she had long felt bitterly resentful, inasmuch as she had lost authority over her husband.

Induced, no doubt, chiefly by vanity, Marion Bidlake had succeeded in obtaining a minor engagement twelve years ago at a provincial theatre, where

Alfred Chichester was playing leading parts with an engagement to open in London in his pocket. Before many days he fell violently in love with Marion, whom he married before many weeks, shortly afterwards insisting on her retirement into private life. Two boys were born, but Marion's married life had been unhappy almost from its beginning.

Although Alfred Chichester was scarcely the man to treat even his wife with actual, personal unkindness, he was a flagrant rover. Still, in spite of constant threats to take the children and herself away, Marion continued to rule over the household until four years previous to his death, when, accepting a far too moderate allowance, she left his roof.

From that day she did not see her husband again until, at Lambert Amory's instigation, she was summoned to his deathbed at Boulogne. Now that he had been laid in his grave, her great anxiety concerned her boys' future. Having realised, through Chichester's forcible, yet well justified, criticism, that she had no talent for the stage, she had lost all desire to return to it.

Although she lived the most monotonous and circumscribed life—[illegible]ing three seats at church and attending [illegible] morning and evening on Sun-

days, she had practically no friends, or even acquaintances. As soon as the parents of her sons' schoolfellows learned that she was living apart from her husband, that was enough. They avoided the house, without taking the trouble to inquire who was to blame for the separation.

Nevertheless, Marion took a pride in the house and in the long, narrow garden which ran down to the railway. Keeping one small servant, she taught herself to cook and to sew, accomplishments naturally neglected in her younger days. She even flattered herself she was able to help the boys with their lessons, and at least she took them to many places of amusement.

Now, however, she was overwhelmed with anxiety. Lambert Amory had, it was true, done his utmost to prove himself her friend at Boulogne and since her return to Brondesbury. Yet she remembered that years ago, when he used to come home with Alfred, she had not very much cared about Mr. Amory. She could not quite understand whether he was laughing at her or not, and she had believed him to be cold and unsympathetic. But he had come more than once already to see her during the few days which had passed since she left Bou-

logne, entering in his self-possessed way into her anxiety concerning future ways and means.

The proceeds of the sale, together with various small, miscellaneous assets, might conceivably, after paying Chichester's debts, enable Marion still to keep on the house in Hoyle Road and pay for the boys' schooling, but every pound had become important, and now she hoped to hear that Mr. Amory had succeeded in finding a Life Assurance policy. Alfred had often talked about insuring his life, but whether he had done so or not Marion did not know. She greeted Lambert in the friendliest manner this afternoon, shaking his hand as he stood on the doorstep, and afterwards standing aside to let the cabman carry in the metal box.

"You can wait to drive me back," said Lambert, and then accompanied Marion to the cheaply furnished dining-room, a striking contrast to that in which Lambert had recently spoken to the auctioneer's clerk.

"You see," said Lambert, "I have brought you the papers, and here," he added, taking it from his pocket, "is the key."

"But did—did you," she demanded anxiously, "find the policy?"

"That's all right," returned Lambert, turning to look through the window at the front garden.

"You have really found it!" she cried, pressing a hand to her bosom.

"Why, yes," said Lambert.

To his consternation, she burst into tears, covering her face with her hands, whilst her body was shaken by sobs.

"Oh, I say, you mustn't do that, you know," murmured Lambert.

He told himself that it was hard lines for any man to be subjected to this kind of thing, whilst Mrs. Chichester began to dry her eyes.

"Do forgive me, Mr. Amory," she pleaded. "But if you only knew what a relief it is. I can't tell you how thankful I feel. Whatever I am doing," she continued, "I seem always to be adding up figures in my head; trying to reckon how much the things will sell for, and what Alfred's debts will amount to, and whether I shall be able to stay here and keep Alf and Charley at the same school—you don't know!"

"Well," said Lambert, "you have been a plucky little woman so far, and you must buck up, you know. We shall soon begin to see where we stand."

"You haven't told me how much the policy was for," cried Marion.

Lambert seemed to hesitate for a few moments.

"Five hundred," he answered. She looked quite gratified on hearing the amount, and in order to cut short the expression of her feelings, Lambert took his hat from the table.

"Will the people at the insurance office send the cheque to you?" she asked.

"I shall have it in a few days," he said. "Meantime if you want money——"

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed. "I am only thinking of the future."

"By-the-bye," answered Lambert, "I have been speaking to a man I know about Charley's drawings. He must let me have some of them—see that he sends them, will you?"

"How good you are to me!" faltered Marion.

"By Jove!" he said, taking out his watch, "it's time I was off. Good-bye," he added, holding out his hand, and taking care to withdraw it at once. Obviously, Mrs. Chichester was in an emotional mood.

She accompanied him to the hall, and stood at the door whilst he went down the steps.

"Oh, Mr. Amory," she exclaimed, as he reached

the gate, "which office was Alfred's life insured in?"

He did not appear to hear, however, so that the question remained unanswered, and it was only after he was seated in the hansom that Lambert turned in Marion's direction, lifting his hat as the horse started.

"A confounded nuisance, this kind of thing," he muttered, lighting a cigarette.

CHAPTER V

ON THE WARPATH

THE smiles with which Mrs. Thwaites welcomed her guests on Tuesday evening disguised a world of anxiety. She was short, stout, and extremely hot, whilst she felt certain she was standing in a draught.

As she had three daughters, it seemed to be her bounden duty to give dances for their benefit, whereas, having no sons, and a husband who suffered from an impediment in his speech, Mrs. Thwaites found it difficult to collect enough young men. Some who accepted her invitations refused point blank to dance, others holding themselves at such a high premium that only the most attractive women—especially the younger married women—stood a chance.

So that when Sir Hugo Warbrook asked her to invite Lambert Amory, Mrs. Thwaites assented with profuse expressions of gratitude.

Lambert, for his part, had not danced for a year or longer, nor would he have taken the trouble to go with Hugo this evening if he had not a definite purpose to serve. As it was, he had perhaps never set out with a stronger sense of expectancy. The more he considered the situation brought about by his perusal of the Chichester letters, the less he liked it; he shrank from betraying Miss Thornhill, on the one hand, and from allowing his friend to take a leap in the dark, on the other. Lambert reached Mrs. Thwaites' house this evening profoundly hoping that personal observation might convince him that there was no necessity to intervene.

"How very kind of you to come, Mr. Amory!" exclaimed his hostess, when Hugo presented him at the door of the large ball-room, and on moving farther in, the first person Lambert recognised was Oswald Sherval, in the act of buttoning his glove, whilst he surveyed the assembled company through his monocle.

Sir Hugo was compelled to admit that Oswald was abominably good-looking. An inch or two shorter than Warbrook, an inch or two taller than Amory, Oswald possessed a remarkably neat figure, which was invariably well clad. He was dis-

posed to pride himself on a resemblance to the portraits of Lord Byron; his dark-brown hair curled about his small, well-shaped head, and his face had grown slightly paler since, with many misgivings, he had consented to occupy a stool in his uncle's counting-house two years ago. As an outdoor man he found the confinement from half-past nine in the morning until five in the afternoon not a little irksome.

Although he had always been on the best of terms with Lambert Amory, they had never been what Sherval would have called "pals"; he could not forget that he had been a boy of fifteen when Lambert was a man of twenty-one, and the gulf had never been bridged.

"Hullo, Lambert!" he said, with a somewhat patronising nod, "who would have thought of seeing you here!"

"Or you," answered Lambert.

"Didn't know I was coming until the day before yesterday," continued Oswald. "Edna Thornhill brought me, you know."

Hugo, standing by Lambert's side, scowled as he listened, then crossing the room, made his way to Edna's side. She looked, he told himself, her very best and brightest this evening, dressed again

entirely in white, with pearls about her neck and lilies-of-the-valley in her corsage. Lambert turned from Oswald to observe her reception of Hugo, upon whom she smiled certainly in the most graciously friendly manner. Before Hugo had time to exchange many words with her, however, Oswald, with his customary air of debonair self-confidence, interrupted them, offering his arm and leading her away for a doubtless prearranged waltz.

"You know," said Hugo, at Lambert's side a few moments later, "it's a mistake for a fellow not to know how to dance."

"Never too late to mend," suggested Amory.

"That's all very well," was the answer, "but the last time I made an attempt I fell down and dragged my partner with me. Imagine such a catastrophe if one were dancing with Edna! I vowed I'd never make an idiot of myself again."

Miss Thwaites came up to impress Lambert, leaving Hugo leaning against the wall with an expression of complete boredom on his face. Twenty minutes later he approached Amory again:

"Come along," he urged. "Let me take you to Edna before she's claimed." Grasping Amory's elbow, Hugo led him round the room, coming to a halt before Miss Thornhill. Glancing up cheer-

fully at his approach, she did not wait for Hugo's unnecessary reintroduction.

"I have not forgotten your existence if you have forgotten mine," she said, looking so fresh and youthful that it struck Lambert she must have been scarcely more than a child at the time those letters were written five years ago; not, in fact, quite seventeen.

But Lambert's mood was suspicious and critical this evening. He had not come to discover whether she was the author of the letters or not; he felt no doubt on that score; his object was rather to make up his mind whether she responded to Hugo's undoubted regard. Still, Lambert could not put the intrigue out of his thoughts, nor refrain from speculating concerning her attitude towards himself.

Did she simply assume that the correspondence had been destroyed years ago? Or was she wondering whether it had come under his notice? Whilst she greeted him with such charming lightheartedness was she weighed down by the dread that he had learned the secret which she would fain have kept to herself—the secret of that assignation with Alfred Chichester?

"Quite a rare event to see you at a dance, Mr.

Amory," she remarked presently, as she put a hand on his arm, walking away from Hugo.

"You must blame Warbrook," was the answer.

"Oh, but why should you blame anybody? And," she cried, "poor Sir Hugo surely looks as if he had enough to put up with already. He looks so much like a fish out of water! I feel certain he despises this kind of thing—if he is really capable of despising anything or anybody."

"Doesn't the suggestion of universal tolerance make one seem a bit of a fool?" suggested Lambert.

"Surely it would be rather the height of wisdom," said Edna. "Besides," she added, as Lambert steered her skilfully about the crowded room, "Sir Hugo does not strike me the least in that way."

"The best fellow in the world," returned Lambert, anxious that she should continue to talk about him.

"Now, for you, that is quite an enthusiastic pronouncement," she exclaimed.

"Am I supposed to be incapable of enthusiasm?"

"Those who should know you best," she answered, "don't seem to expect much in that way."

"Someone has been telling tales out of school," said Lambert.

"Sir Hugo," she rejoined, as they continued to waltz, "was saying you had lately been abroad."

Lambert wondered whether she was beginning to lead up to a discussion of Chichester, or whether her remark was merely casual.

"Then," he suggested, "I daresay you heard the melancholy reason?"

"I think," she answered, "he told me you were sent for by Mr. Chichester."

"Were you one of his admirers?" asked Lambert.

"An admirer of his acting, do you mean?"

Her manner could scarcely have been more self-possessed, and if her desire was to ascertain the fate of the letters, she assuredly executed it with consummate skill.

"I had not seen him for years," she continued, and then they were brought to a sudden standstill. "Oh, dear!" cried Edna, "there goes my flounce!"

A man stood with his partner on his arm, apologising for having trodden on her frock, and the next moment Lambert was leading her away to one of the ante-rooms, where she sat down whilst he knelt to cut off a piece of torn lace from her skirt.

"Shall you mind if we don't go back?" she asked,

and Lambert took a seat by her side. "What were we talking about?" she added, although he did not imagine she had forgotten.

"About Chichester—whom you don't seem to have admired without reservation."

"Is it possible to admire any man or woman without?" she returned.

"Shall I make the natural rejoinder?"

"Oh, please don't!" she said with a laugh.

"Perhaps," he persisted, "your taste has developed since you saw him——"

"When I was a child, I suppose I thought as a child."

"Ah, yes, but some of us never quite succeed in putting away childish things," suggested Lambert.

She was looking down at her small, old-fashioned fan, opening and closing it.

"Are they the more or the less fortunate?" she demanded.

Lambert wondered whether her thoughts had gone back five years, but although it became difficult to resist the idea that she was "fishing," he determined that she should gain no clue to his own mind. She did not impress him as the possessor of a guilty secret, but in any case she must be

spared the humiliation of suspecting that he shared it. It seemed obvious that any definite endeavour to avoid the topic might awaken her fear, and that his safest plan was to discuss it as though those letters had not come under his notice.

"Sir Hugo," she remarked after a short pause, "said you had been hard at work on Mr. Chichester's papers."

"There were a good many to look through," Lambert admitted.

"Letters?" she asked, leaning back and fanning herself.

"Some of them."

Lambert deprecated inquiries which impressed more deeply on his mind a lamentable fact which he would willingly for the time have forgotten. It was scarcely any longer possible to resist the notion that she was deliberately pumping him.

"I always wonder that anyone should keep old letters," she murmured.

"How infinitely poorer the world would be!" he returned. "Imagine the loss of Charles Lamb's, of Edward Fitzgerald's, of Cowper's——"

"But even during their lifetime," she said, "people must have known those were worth keeping, and we were talking of the letters Mr. Chichester

received, not of those he wrote. What a task to wade through them all!—but perhaps you didn't?" she added.

"A glance was generally enough," answered Lambert.

"Enough for what?"

"To determine whether they should go on the fire," said Lambert.

"Then you—you burned a great many?"

He wondered whether the tightening grip of her fan was accidental, or whether her nerves were in a state of extreme tension. Yet she was able to smile now and then as people she knew passed in and out of the ante-room.

"Oh, yes," he said, "I burned a great many."

He sat watching her profile, and told himself that he had never done her justice until this evening. Of all the women—although the word scarcely described her, so young she looked to-night—he had known, none appeared less likely to have condescended to write such letters as he had recently read. He observed Edna's low forehead, with the dark-brown hair curling about it, the clearly cut outline of her face, the short nose, with sensitive nostrils, the curving upper lip, the firm chin, with the beautiful line of her neck. She had long

black eyelashes, and an expression of sympathetic friendliness in her eyes which almost counteracted the perhaps slightly disdainful mouth. The lilies-of-the-valley at her breast rose and fell, suggesting that her emotions were less tranquil than her words would have led him to believe. For a few moments she might have forgotten his presence, and Lambert wondered again whether she was endeavouring to determine how much he knew.

Then she rose to her feet, all vivacity once more, asking him to take her back to the dancing-room.

"My partners will be hunting for me," she exclaimed. But she promised him another dance later in the evening, and when the time came Lambert made a point of introducing Oswald Sherval's name, reminding himself that concerning her relationship to Hugo he remained as ignorant as when he had entered the house.

"Oh, yes," she said with unembarrassed frankness, "Oswald and I are the greatest friends. Of course we have known each other for years."

"Fortune is by way of smiling on him," suggested Lambert.

"Well," she cried, "I fancy he deserves it. You must understand," she added, "that if it had not

been for me he would never have dreamt of going into the bank."

"I had wondered what could be the potent cause," said Lambert, disposed to congratulate himself, because he by no means felt the same responsibility towards Oswald as towards Hugo Warbrook. "To whom," asked Amory, "is Oswald talking just now?"

"Do you admire her?" demanded Edna, with obvious interest.

"In her way," he returned, "she is the handsomest woman in the room—certainly the most distinguished-looking."

"In her way!" cried Edna, with a note of reproach in her voice.

"Oh, well," he explained, "she has every charm but that of youth."

"She is forty-one," said Edna, "but whatever her age, she must always be beautiful. Her features are the most perfect I have ever seen, and the grey in her hair suits her as admirably as powder used to suit some of our ancestors."

"I don't recollect having met her before," was the answer.

"It would be impossible to forget her if you had," Edna insisted. "But that is your own fault,

because she comes to London regularly every season, and has done for years."

"Then you know her very well?"

"Why, of course. She is my aunt—my father's sister, and my very dearest friend as well. Besides," added Edna, "I am her god-daughter."

CHAPTER VI

MISS THORNHILL

LAMBERT AMORY'S figure suddenly seemed to stiffen; he felt as if a douche of cold water were playing on his back. He had waltzed with Edna from the first bars to the last, and now, coming to a standstill, gazed down at her eager face in something like consternation. A moment later he had recovered his self-possession, and leading her out of the room, found a secluded seat in one where many of the guests were crowded about a buffet.

"Then she also is a Miss Thornhill?" he asked.

"Why, naturally," she returned; then flushing vividly, Edna bit her lower lip.

"Were you named after her?" he inquired, and observed that she was experiencing an almost painful embarrassment.

He seemed to know what the answer would be before she parted her lips.

"Yes," said Edna, "we are both Edna Thornhill."

Lambert at once realised that he had made a discovery of the utmost importance. He had entered Mrs. Thwaites' house a few hours earlier with the firm conviction that Edna Thornhill had been the writer of the Chichester letters, and this being the case, it had been easy to read a significant purpose in what might, after all, have been innocent if inquisitive remarks.

Now, however, he had learned that there existed two Edna Thornhills, either of whom might conceivably have written to Alfred Chichester five years ago. For Miss Thornhill (the aunt) had, he was assured, come to London every season for many years. She, as well as her niece, might have signed herself "Edna," and have dated her letters from Number 7 Grandison Street, Mayfair.

It was difficult, indeed, to suspect the distinguished-looking Miss Thornhill of such a lapse, yet surely not more difficult than to suspect Edna. Miss Thornhill must have been about thirty-five years of age at the time—old enough, certainly, to know better. But at least there was room for honest doubt, and the affair had begun to assume a vastly different

Already Lambert felt eager, at all costs, to exonerate Edna. It appeared as repugnant to enlighten Hugo concerning her weakness, as to keep him in the dark. But if Miss Thornhill, instead of her niece, proved to be the author of the letters, they need have no further concern for Lambert Amory.

Still, he warned himself not to take too much for granted. There was at present nothing resembling certainty, although there might be an excuse for suspending judgment. In any case, it appeared desirable to secure an introduction to Miss Thornhill, and with this purpose Lambert presently went in search of Sir Hugo.

"I have just made the discovery that there are two Miss Thornhills in the room," he said.

"Oh, ah yes," answered Hugo indifferently. "The third time Edna has danced with that fellow Sherval to-night," he added.

"Is the aunt staying in Grandison Street?" asked Lambert.

"Why, of course! Where else should she stay?" said Hugo impatiently. "She lives at Paulhampton, you know."

"In your constituency?"

"She has a splendid place there," Hugo ex-

plained. "Keeps any number of horses. She has brought three or four to London with her."

"Well, then," said Lambert, "you know her well enough to present me."

Accompanying him across the room, Hugo stopped before Miss Thornhill and went through a form of introduction.

"It's useless to ask me to dance, Mr. Amory," said Miss Thornhill. "I renounced that particular vanity years ago. To-night I am here merely as my niece's chaperon."

"Anyhow, we can talk," suggested Lambert.

"I will begin with a confession," she exclaimed. "There's nothing I enjoy half so much. Now, please don't go away with the idea that I am addicted to gossip——"

"The feast of reason!"

"Oh, one need not try to be too reasonable," she returned, "and as a frivolous beginning you may take me to get an ice."

They made their way to the buffet, where Lambert supplied her wants, and she in the meantime succeeded in finding a cosy corner unoccupied.

"You are Warbrook's neighbour at Paulhampton?" he remarked, taking the seat by her side.

He fancied that he could detect a slight resem-

blance between the aunt and the niece, although the skin of his present companion was more warmly tinted. Miss Thornhill also was built upon a larger scale; her features were more massive, her forehead was loftier, her eyes lighter in colour and more prominent. Her figure was superb, with a stateliness of carriage that made it difficult to imagine her in any undignified situation.

"As you are such an intimate friend of Sir Hugo's," she said, "I wonder I have never met you there."

"When I leave London," he explained, "I generally fly to the mountains."

"Oh, yes, I know," she cried. "In fact, I know all about you. Now, for my own part, I only tear myself away from home to come to London once a year——"

"I suppose you always stay with Mrs. Thornhill?" suggested Lambert.

He would readily have admitted that no one was less fitted than himself to play the part of an amateur detective, and assuredly no one could less have enjoyed the office. Yet such was the rôle that seemed to have been thrust upon him by untoward circumstance. Lambert had to discriminate between

Miss Thornhill and her niece, and to tell the truth, he scarcely knew how to begin.

"Usually," said Miss Thornhill, in the act of raising a spoonful of ice to her mouth, "but not always."

"Miss Thornhill is your god-daughter?" he persisted.

"Are you thinking it must be a great responsibility?" she asked. "But," she added, "Edna is the sweetest girl. Don't you think," she asked, facing Lambert abruptly, "that Sir Hugo would agree with me?"

"Undoubtedly."

"You must know," she explained, "that it was I who brought them together. Pray don't imagine me as a matchmaker—not at all. It is positively my first attempt, but I thought no two persons could be better matched——"

"Judging by experience of one's married friends, that is not strong evidence," said Lambert.

"But there is plenty besides," Miss Thornhill insisted. "I fancy that Edna is adapting herself; she is not uninfluenced by Sir Hugo's example. My sister-in-law tells me she is becoming quite—what shall I call it?—quite evangelical!"

"One would scarcely suspect it," returned Lambert.

"Ah! that lends her an additional piquancy. The word seems to fit Edna; she is certainly piquant, and yet positively harmless, you know. Now, after seeing her here this evening, you would scarcely imagine she had spent the afternoon interviewing poor girls in a slum near King's Cross."

"You set that down to Warbrook's influence?" asked Lambert, struck by the suggestion.

"Well, a continual dropping will wear away a stone," was the answer. "Not that there is anything in the least hard about Edna—all soft and womanly, isn't she? I confess that Sir Hugo is capable of boring one, but Edna is patience personified. Oh, yes," she added, "I think his leaven is working."

"You may have heard of Miss Brownlow," said Lambert.

"Oh yes; *but I assumed she was simply the means*——"

"Warbrook being the end?"

Miss Thornhill laughed in a quiet, self-satisfied manner, which might have alarmed Lambert more an hour earlier.

"By-the-bye," she suggested, "you appeared to

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be having a rather interesting conversation with Edna some time ago—to judge by what I saw of your faces in passing."

Now Lambert found his opportunity.

"We were talking about Alfred Chichester," he returned, with his eyes on Miss Thornhill's face.

For a moment she did not answer. He fancied that her cheeks turned a shade paler, that her eyes wore almost a scared expression. His pre-existing doubt gained force, and Edna became exalted in his estimation.

"Ah yes, of course," said her aunt. "Sir Hugo was telling me that Mr. Chichester was a friend of yours."

"But not of yours!"

She turned, staring at him deliberately.

"Why do you say that?" she demanded.

"I judged by your voice—it seemed to express nothing but disapproval."

"So," she continued, "my niece was interested in Mr. Chichester?"

"Oh well," was the answer, "she was kind enough not to show that the subject bored her."

"For my part," said Miss Thornhill, "I prefer to talk of anything rather. To tell you the truth,

I have a profound antipathy for the lady-killer type of man."

"Did you know him personally?" asked Lambert, feeling, perhaps, less desirous to spare Miss Thornhill than her niece.

"I met him once," she exclaimed. "That was several years ago, and I have never wished to see him, either on or off the stage, again. However," she added, "he was a friend of yours, and besides, he is dead."

She spoke with deeper feeling than he would have expected if her acquaintance with Chichester had been only casual, but still long habit compelled Lambert to consider the affair with a certain detachment. Fain would he, indeed, believe that Miss Thornhill, rather than Edna, had written the letters, but he was bound to hold the balance even.

Edna might be their author, and her aunt might be aware of the fact, and detest Chichester accordingly. On the other hand, Miss Thornhill might have entered into the intrigue and been found out by her niece. This view of the case seemed to account for what Lambert could not even now help suspecting had been Edna's endeavour to find out how much he knew. The net result of the evening's

experience was that judgment must still be suspended.

Still, it must not be suspended too long. Hugo must not be permitted to run his neck into the noose, whereas there could be no question that in Miss Thornhill's opinion Edna was prepared to marry him if he asked her to become his wife.

"There's one thing," said Hugo, walking away from the house with an arm through Lambert's, in the small hours, "I wish you would do for me. You see," he explained, "since Miss Thornhill came to London a few days ago, she lends Edna a mount, and they go to the Row every morning. I called for them this morning, and so I shall on most days. Two are company, and three are none, you understand."

"So you want me to take the aunt off your hands?" said Lambert.

"Upon my word, I should be immensely obliged to you," was the answer, and although Lambert insisted that he had work which prevented him from fixing a date at the moment, he promised to do so as soon as circumstances permitted. His only hope, indeed, of clearing up his present doubts, was to seize every opportunity of coming into contact with both Edna and Miss Thornhill.

CHAPTER VII

IN HYDE PARK

LAMBERT AMORY fell asleep thinking over his experiences at Mrs. Thwaites' dance, and the following morning awoke with the same subject in his mind. Whether or not the subconscious part of him had been at work during his slumbers, he had not opened his eyes many minutes before he conceived what appeared a happy thought.

It seemed so obvious that he marvelled it had not occurred to him before. If he could obtain specimens of the handwriting of both Miss Thornhill and her niece, the doubt which perplexed his mind might be solved. He told himself as he dressed that there could not be a more satisfactory test, the only difficulty concerning its application.

Although the Chichester letters had been destroyed, Lambert felt convinced that he should recognise the writing the instant he saw it again; the

question remained: How in the world could he see it? But in any event, the sooner he saw Edna Thornhill again the better, and accordingly he went to one of Sir Hugo Warbrook's clubs on Thursday afternoon.

Standing together by a window overlooking Pall Mall, the two men strikingly contrasted: Hugo tall, loosely built, with his long neck and wide, sloping shoulders, wearing his clothes carelessly, gesticulating freely as he spoke; Lambert shorter, more compact in figure, quiet, self-contained, admirably but inconspicuously dressed.

"I can spare you an hour or so to-morrow morning, if you like," he said.

"My dear fellow," cried Hugo, "nothing could suit me better. I've arranged to call for Miss Thornhill and Edna in Grandison Street at ten. Suppose I send a horse for you at a quarter past, sharp?"

"You don't propose to take me with you, then?"

"Why, no," said Hugo thoughtfully. "Better not, I think. If you wouldn't mind riding from your place—say, to the Albert Memorial, you would be certain to meet us when you turn back to Hyde Park Corner. Upon my word, it's immensely good of you," Hugo added, and on reach-

ing Bryanston Square he at once telephoned the necessary instructions to his stables.

At the appointed time the horse was brought by one of Sir Hugo's grooms to Manchester Street, and Lambert came out, wearing an unexceptionable tweed suit, with baggy breeches, gaiters, and a white straw hat. If he had not ridden well he would not have ridden at all, being very much afraid, indeed (although he would not have cared to admit the fact), of showing himself at a disadvantage. Having reached, according to Hugo's instructions, the Memorial, he faced about, and half way to Hyde Park Corner saw Hugo, Miss Thornhill, and Edna riding abreast.

In a grey habit and a white hat she looked almost more fascinating than in her ball dress at Mrs. Thwaites' dance the night before last; but Miss Thornhill, Lambert thought, showed to less advantage. Although admirably turned out, her appearance was a little too uncompromisingly severe, as if she needed frills and furbelows to impart a suggestion of femininity.

Now, Sir Hugo Warbrook was regarded by himself and everybody who knew him as a man of almost meticulous veracity, yet to judge by his demeanour as he was joined by Lambert Amory this

morning, no one could have suspected that the encounter had been pre-arranged, or that Lambert was bestriding a horse from Hugo's stables.

"Mr. Amory!" exclaimed Edna, as they all stopped for a moment, "what a curious coincidence! We were just discussing you as you came into sight."

"Sir Hugo," said her aunt, "was promising to bring you to Grandison Street one afternoon."

Hugo beamed upon Lambert, desiring nothing better than that his friends should favourably regard his friend. But when the four rode on again he began to frown. He had retained the boyish habit of showing his feelings in his face. How the arrangement came about he could not precisely understand, but certainly he had assumed that whilst Lambert attached himself to Miss Thornhill, Edna would become his own companion. For what other purpose was Amory there, indeed! But to Hugo's disappointment he found himself riding by the aunt's side, Lambert following with Edna, as if this were the proper and natural order.

"May I come to Grandison Street?" asked Lambert, turning to look into her face.

"Is that a necessary question after my aunt's spontaneous invitation?" she returned.

"You did not second it," said Lambert.

"Are you," cried Edna, as Hugo glanced back over his shoulder, expecting that Amory would lose no time in redressing the grievance, "one of those uncomfortable persons who require pressing?"

"Silence doesn't invariably give consent," he suggested.

He felt that her eyes were on his face, and, meeting them, fancied they expressed something like defiance.

"Why do you imagine I should object?" she demanded, adding the next instant with a smile, "and what a fuss to make about a trifle!" As she ceased speaking Hugo glanced back over his shoulder again.

"In fact," said Lambert, "I exaggerate my own importance."

"Or mine," murmured Edna.

"After all," was the answer, "I suppose we are the most important persons in the world—to ourselves."

"Do you really mean that, Mr. Amory?"

"To tell you the truth," he said, "the most perplexing of problems is to imagine how the show will ever get along without me."

"You are more morbid than I thought," returned Edna.

"Oh well," he continued, "one can't always help looking into the future, and wherever I may be a hundred years hence, it's certain I sha'n't be here."

"Is it certain?" she asked.

"So you think it possible we may revisit the glimpses of the moon?"

"The experience might be a little distressing," she admitted. "The idea of knowing what one's former friends were thinking about one!"

"Depend upon it, they would not trouble themselves after the first five minutes," said Lambert. "Do you torment yourself," he asked, "about their opinions in your present phase?"

"Doesn't everybody?" she exclaimed.

"Anyhow," he returned, "that kind of thing scarcely makes for happiness."

Hugo, turning ostentatiously in his saddle, was now fixing reproachful eyes on the pair.

"What does?" demanded Edna.

"The great thing," said Lambert, "is to grasp the fact that the world, including ourselves, is at present imperfect."

"Well," she retorted with a sigh, "that is quite easy."

"You must realise," he continued, "that man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward. The secret of life is not to expect too much of anybody just yet."

"Then on that condition," exclaimed Edna, "you may certainly come to Grandison Street."

"This afternoon?"

"Oh, whenever you please," she answered, and now Hugo was really beginning to lose patience. Lambert, instead of improving the situation, had made it worse than ever! On previous occasions, Warbrook had at least enjoyed the felicity of riding with Edna on one side, although Miss Thornhill had been on the other; but now he had lost her altogether.

It was scarcely that he could feel jealous of Lambert, whom he was inclined to blame rather for clumsy mismanagement of a delicate negotiation than for a deliberate attempt to oust him. Amory in love, or as the fervent admirer of any man or woman in the flesh, was entirely beyond the range of Hugo's imagination.

"Don't you think," he suggested, turning to face Miss Thornhill, "that we ought to wait for the others?"

"Perhaps it would be as well," she returned,

tightening her reins, and when the pair rode up she went on in front with Lambert. "For this relief much thanks!" she cried, Warbrook falling behind with Edna. "Of course," Miss Thornhill continued, "I quite understand that Sir Hugo found me an insufferable nuisance, but it is certainly humiliating to have the fact so plainly shown. Not that I marvel at his impatience. Don't you think Edna looks her very best in a riding habit?" she asked.

"Her best is certainly excellent," answered Lambert, with unusual vehemence.

"Ah, but you should have seen her four or five years ago," said Miss Thornhill.

"Was that," asked Lambert, remembering that it must have been about the period of the Chichester letters, "a more interesting age?"

"More interesting? Well, I don't know about that, but she had the beauty of the budding rose, you know."

"She surely has it still."

"Anyhow," said Miss Thornhill, "if Edna was more lovely at seventeen she was not more lovable."

"Her character has improved?" suggested Lambert, on the alert for fresh light.

"I wonder," cried Miss Thornhill, as they rode

by the Serpentine, "whether characters ever improve, or whether they are not fixed immutably before birth. Can anything, for example, make a weak man strong?"

"There are the popular moral tonics!"

"Yes, but many physicians are inclined to deprecate drugs nowadays," she insisted. "If a drunkard becomes sober he will still show his lack of self-control in some other kind of excess."

"Less injurious, perhaps," said Lambert.

"Oh, very likely," she continued. "Just as a man who nags his wife may find some genuine grievance—he may, for instance, become a social reformer, and let his own household rest in peace. You know, Mr. Amory," she said, "the best characters don't invariably act the best."

"How do you know them if not by their deeds?" asked Lambert.

"Don't we recognise them intuitively? I have met men and women whose names the world has never heard, but yet I had the inclination to make obeisance. Surely courage is the highest virtue, and you must have lived long enough to know that caution—to put it mildly—is accountable for many of the deeds that are the most extolled. Then inexperience—ignorance has so much to answer for!

But though we require time to beat our music out, it may be more harmonious because a jarring lyre was touched at first."

He could not refrain from giving a personal application to what might well have been intended to have merely a general significance. But it appeared certain she could not be talking of herself, at least in connection with the Chichester affair. Miss Thornhill could scarcely have been considered "inexperienced" five years ago, when she must have passed her thirty-fifth year!

On the other hand, whether she intended it or not, her theory might apply to Edna, although in this case the existence of those letters must have been known to her aunt.

"So," he suggested, "good may come out of evil!"

"If you call evil the soil in which the loveliest plants grow to flower and fruit," said Miss Thornhill.

"In fact," returned Lambert, "virtue blossoms in the dust?"

"I am told," she said, "that we owe to the dust some of the most glorious colours in the atmosphere."

Hugo, in the meantime, might have forgotten his

vexation with Lambert if Edna had not somewhat irritatingly persisted in talking about him.

"You know, Sir Hugo," she began, as soon as they were alone together, "I find a new amusement in studying you and Mr. Amory. I quite enjoy drawing you both out in turn."

"I suppose you judge each by what the other says of him," said Hugo, who might not have given Lambert the best of characters at the moment.

"Or," she exclaimed, "by what he says of the other. Because I form my own opinion, and check yours by it. I am inclined to think you are mistaken."

"What a marvellously beautiful morning," said Hugo as they were riding parallel with the Bayswater Road, towards the Marble Arch.

"Yes, isn't it!" she answered, adding the next moment, "I am afraid you are just a little superficial."

"Now," said Hugo, "I am by way of priding myself on an attempt at least to get at the heart of things."

"Still, you don't invariably succeed—concerning Mr. Amory, for instance."

"Did you see Agatha yesterday?" asked Hugo.

"I was rather disappointed," she returned.

"With the very best intentions, my mother is disposed to put difficulties in the way."

"If you were left to yourself——"

"Goodness knows what I should do," she cried. "Of course you cannot understand such weakness."

"Why, yes," he answered, "I realise the difficulties of your position. One doesn't care always to rebel against constituted authority even in a good cause."

"You," Edna continued, "are—I suppose—a strong man, who has always had a constant purpose——"

"No," he said, and then after a moody interval Hugo repeated, "No." She glanced quickly into his flushed, freckled face. "I would not have you think that of me," he continued, with an obvious effort. "It is true I had a great awakening—— It is not a thing one finds easy to talk about."

"Then let us return to our gossip about Mr. Amory," she suggested, with a sympathetic expression.

"Bear with me a minute," urged Hugo, bending forward in his saddle towards her. "I should like you to know that before I left the 'Varsity I found no serious interest in anything. Oddly enough, it

was Amory who took me to hear the sermon that made me a new man."

"You really—you really believe that?" asked Edna.

"What?" returned Hugo.

"In the possibility of such a change?"

"My own experience vouches for it," he said.

"You believe," she demanded eagerly, "that in spite of all that had gone before—whatever it was—you were enabled to—to turn over a new leaf——"

"I believe," he returned solemnly, "that the Sunday evening of which I have told you, when Amory, prompted by sheer curiosity, took me with him, was the epoch of my life. I keep the anniversary as my most important festival. Nothing has been the same since, and, please God, I hope it never will be."

"That is just my fear," said Edna a little wistfully. "One seems to be so much a creature of impulse."

"But if the impulses are good—as I know yours to be?"

"Ah, you know remarkably little about me, Sir Hugo," she murmured. "Perhaps it is as well," she added, as the others rode up at the Marble Arch.

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. THORNHILL

"MR. AMORY," said Miss Thornhill, as she entered Edna's bedroom and sat down in a comfortable low chair on the hearthrug, "manages to put one on the best of terms with one's self. I suppose," she added, as her niece smiled, "you think that nothing of that kind is necessary. Well, I am thankful that I don't possess a finicking conscience, but I certainly find him stimulating. He makes me talk my best. Now, from poor Sir Hugo I couldn't force a sensible word. He would not even listen to what I said."

"Strange that two such different men should be such excellent friends!" suggested Edna.

"Not at all," was the answer. "The essence of friendship is to create pleasurable sensations."

"But I should have imagined that each of those two found everything to disapprove of in the other."

"Of course, and consequently each gives the other the most agreeable feeling of superiority. Mr. Amory, no doubt, holds himself far above Sir Hugo's perfect orthodoxy. Sir Hugo smiles from his own loftier pedestal. For my part, I like them both. The one makes an appeal to what I am pleased to call my intellect, the other to my scanty stock of emotion."

"Then Mr. Amory leaves you cold?" said Edna.

"Oh, perfectly. No one can pretend that he radiates heat. But Sir Hugo is the very kindest and best-intentioned person I know. His stuff will wear well. He not only has a good heart, but he stimulates you by letting you see it."

"I had no idea," suggested Edna, "you were so fond of the obvious."

"My dear," said Miss Thornhill gravely, "at Mrs. Thwaites' dance the other evening I ate a pineapple ice and quite enjoyed it—at the time, but for human nature's daily food, ordinary, plain, wholesome fare is the best and safest."

"Hear! hear!" cried Edna, lightly clapping her hands as she turned towards the door, whereupon her aunt rose from the chair and accompanied her downstairs to luncheon.

During the meal Mrs. Thornhill suggested that

she should go to see her married daughter that afternoon, but hearing that Sir Hugo's friend, Lambert Amory, was likely to come to Grandison Street, she changed her plans—a little reluctantly.

Mrs. Thornhill was certainly happier with Mrs. Robbins just now than with anybody else. Clara's two children being girls, their father anxiously hoped for an heir, whose advent, Mrs. Thornhill perceived, was necessary for the general welfare of the household. One might almost have thought that she had some control over the affair, and left to her own devices she would have talked of nothing but Clara's imminent prospects.

"Mr. Amory intends to take time by the forelock, then," remarked Miss Thornhill, and indeed he entered the drawing-room at half-past four that afternoon. Hugo had arrived only a few minutes earlier, and on Lambert's appearance his face certainly showed no signs of overwhelming gratification, after the experience of the morning.

Mrs. Thornhill received Lambert with the cordiality which she would have extended to any friend of Sir Hugo's.

"So interesting," she exclaimed, "to think that you should both have been at the same schools.

Poor Mr. Chichester, too! How extremely sudden, Mr. Amory!"

"By-the-bye," said Hugo, "I met Marion Chichester yesterday afternoon, with one of her boys, on the way to the National Gallery. She says he draws rather well."

"Now what an excellent thing if he should turn out to be a genius!" cried Mrs. Thornhill.

"I'm afraid he won't," returned Lambert.

"But," said Hugo, "how can you tell? The boy may have something in him. A pity to throw cold water on the youngster."

"Have you seen any of his drawings, Mr. Amory?" asked Miss Thornhill.

"A few dozen," answered Lambert.

"You don't think much of them?"

"I am not a judge, but I showed them to Pargitter——"

"The Royal Academician?"

"Yes," said Lambert, "and the result will be, no doubt, that the boy will try to get into the Royal Academy schools. Pargitter says there should be no difficulty."

"How kind of you to take so much interest!" exclaimed Mrs. Thornhill, and Lambert's face be-

came less impassive. He looked seriously alarmed and annoyed.

"Marion," continued Hugo, "didn't recognise me at first. Of course it must be seven or eight years since we met. I understood you to say that Chichester's life was not insured?"

"Did you?" asked Lambert, glancing at the hat which he had placed on the floor by the side of his chair.

"I thought you said so," answered Hugo, "but I felt immensely pleased to find I had made a mistake."

"What is the sum?" inquired Mrs. Thornhill.

"Only five hundred," said Lambert, and turning he saw that Edna's eyes were resting on his face.

"Well, I really am immensely glad," cried Hugo, and then Lambert made a desperate effort to change the topic. As soon as possible he rose from his chair, although Mrs. Thornhill clung to his hand as if she had an objection to let him go.

"I do hope you will come to see us again," she said. "I never go out unless I can't help it, but when people are kind enough to come here I am always grateful to them. You must see that Mr. Amory doesn't neglect us, Sir Hugo," she added.

She expressed her disappointment when he also

rose, not liking to outstay Lambert, who had been the last to arrive. By this time Hugo had almost forgiven Amory for the error of the morning, and outside in the street he took his arm in the usual friendly manner.

"Delightful people, aren't they?" he said. "Yet, do you know," he continued, "I can't make it out, but Mrs. Thornhill always has a chilling effect upon me. I met her in the street the other day, and couldn't find a word to say for myself. The unfortunate part of it was that she seemed frozen up, too, and after we had shaken hands there we stood like a pair of dumb idiots."

Lambert listened to his remarks about the family, including Mrs. Robbins, until they parted at the corner of Manchester Street, but Hugo suggested no more rides in Hyde Park. Amory did not see either Miss Thornhill or Edna again until the following Tuesday, a week after the dance. He had begun to warn himself that the investigation, in which he was growing more and deeply interested, had come to a standstill. At the present rate he could never hope to satisfy himself whether Edna or her aunt had written the Chichester letters, yet with every day that went by

the necessity to enlighten Hugo appeared more urgent.

Lambert had more than once during the interval asked himself whether it was inevitably necessary that Hugo should be put upon his guard. Rightly or wrongly, he felt regretfully unable to allow Warbrook to marry Edna in ignorance of the episode of five years ago. Nor could he feel satisfied that she would refuse Hugo if he asked her to become his wife. It appeared obviously preferable from every point of view to speak out before the beginning of an engagement rather than after. Yet for all Lambert could tell, there might be no need to say a word.

There was perhaps nothing for which he had a greater antipathy than an ordinary afternoon call, but thinking it possible that Edna would go to Mrs. Thwaites' this afternoon, he determined for once to put his dislike in his pocket. And it happened that fortune favoured him, for within a few yards of the house he saw Edna coming away from the door alone. Whilst he was hesitating as to whether he should speak to her or not, she astonished him by stopping and holding out her hand.

"Are you," she inquired, "going where I have just been?"

"On the contrary," he returned, "I am bound in the direction of Grandison Street."

"Now," she asked, continuing her way by his side, "is that the truth, Mr. Amory?"

"The proof of the pudding is in the eating," he said.

"Because you don't always tell the truth," she exclaimed.

"Do you know anybody who does?"

"Only Sir Hugo," she returned. "But you," she added, "do good by stealth, and blush to find it fame."

"I flattered myself I was past blushing," said Lambert.

"The astounding thing was," she continued as they walked along one of the quieter streets, "that Sir Hugo should be so easily deceived, though I suppose he is one of those good-natured men who can always be hoodwinked."

"No doubt," Lambert admitted, "he is often taken advantage of."

"It seemed so plain to me," she insisted, "that you had made Mrs. Chichester a present of that five hundred pounds. It was, as my mother annoyed you by saying about the boy's drawings, very good of you."

"Goodness had nothing to do with it," he retorted. "Chichester was one of my oldest friends, and I had always liked his wife. Knowing that she would be the last woman in the world to accept a present, I felt compelled to resort to an artifice."

"I suppose," said Edna, "she is a very charming woman?"

For an instant he was silent, gazing down at the upturned face by his side. He saw it flush, saw her eyes cast down.

"Beauty," he answered, "is a matter of taste, you know."

"Mr. Amory," she murmured, "I am sorry. It was paltry to say that."

"Very likely one doesn't quite understand one's own motives," he said.

"Will you forgive me?" asked Edna, raising her eyes again. "But then there is really no such thing as forgiveness, is there? The word has no meaning. You will always remember——"

"I never trust my memory," answered Lambert.

"Do you ever trust anybody?" she demanded.

"Oh dear, yes."

"I recollect," said Edna, "that your theory of life is to expect very little."

"Still, one's theories constantly require to be

given up," he returned, as they reached the door of Number 7 Grandison Street.

Walking slowly away, Lambert told himself that never, since that evening when Hugo had taken him to her side at Mrs. Thwaites', had he met Edna without something falling from her lips which might be intended to refer to her own conduct five years ago. Having come to the conclusion that he knew nothing about the intrigue with Alfred Chichester, could it be possible that she permitted herself to play (seriously enough) about the subject, and when she had said a few minutes ago that there is no such thing as forgiveness, did she mean that all her tears could not wash out a word of those lamentable letters?

CHAPTER IX

ANOTHER COMPLICATION

DURING the next few days Lambert Amory saw nothing either of Sir Hugo Warbrook or any member of the Thornhill family, and at the end of a week he succeeded in persuading himself that he might pay a second visit to Grandison Street, especially when he remembered Mrs. Thornhill's pressing invitation.

Hearing from the butler that she was "not at home," but that Miss Thornhill was in the drawing-room, he went upstairs, expecting to see Edna, and felt proportionately disappointed to enter the presence of her aunt.

"My sister-in-law," she exclaimed, offering her hand, "has gone to Portland Place. She almost lives there just now."

Miss Thornhill broke off suddenly on seeing that Lambert was not paying the slightest heed to her

remarks. His eyes, indeed, were fixed on the small octagonal table at her left hand. There lay an already opened letter, addressed to "Miss Thornhill, 7 Grandison Street," in a large, firm, bold handwriting, which struck him as being ominously familiar. It bore a remarkable resemblance to that of the Chichester letters, and being seen in this house was, consequently, what Lambert had been eagerly looking for.

"Won't you tell me what is the matter?" asked Miss Thornhill.

"Why, nothing," returned Lambert, taking himself to task.

"Oh yes there is," she insisted, following the direction of his eyes. "Perhaps it is that letter," she added. "Were you trying to discover the writer's character from her caligraphy? Do you believe in that kind of thing?—although I am told you really don't believe in anything!"

"I fancied I had seen the writing before," said Lambert.

"But then so many of us write alike nowadays," she answered. "In fact, it seems we do almost everything as much alike as possible. We wear the same dresses, go to the same places, use the same slang. But the letter," she explained, "is from an

old schoolfellow of Edna's—they used to be the most intimate friends, though now only the tradition remains. Joan lives at Brighton."

"At Brighton!" cried Lambert, unable to forget that the author of the Chichester letters had written two of them from there.

"Why should you be astonished?" demanded Miss Thornhill. "Several thousands go to make up the population, you know."

"Has she lived there long?" Lambert could not resist asking.

"Your curiosity makes me quite curious," was the answer. "Does the name awaken fond memories?"

"You have not told me what it is."

"Well, I will tell you now. It is Fletcher, and I assure you she is usually very much admired. She was certainly the loveliest child I have ever seen, but as a young woman—well, of course, beauty is much a matter of taste. She is extremely fair—quite flax-coloured hair, with large blue eyes; what, I believe, are sometimes called saucer eyes. Anyhow, as she is coming to stay here a few days, you will, no doubt, have an opportunity of forming your own opinion," Miss Thornhill added, as the door opened to admit Edna.

For an instant she looked surprised to see Lam-

bert sitting with her aunt, but after a momentary hesitation crossed the room with her hand outstretched and a faint smile on her lips.

"Well," exclaimed her aunt, "how did you find the neighbourhood of King's Cross?"

"Oh, it—it makes one's heart ache," was the impulsive answer.

She looked none the less enticing on account of her unwontedly sombre garb. Hitherto, Lambert had invariably seen her in the brighter colours which seemed to accord with her gladsome nature, but this afternoon everything about her was dark and inconspicuous as usual when she went to Ashbourne Street. To-day an unusually painful case had come under her notice, that of a girl some years younger than herself, and even now Edna was unable to shake off a feeling of depression.

"We have been talking about Joan," said Miss Thornhill. "Mr. Amory happened to see your letter on the table, and fancied that he recognised the writing."

Edna, sinking into the nearest chair, seemed to change her mind, and start again to her feet.

"I have been trying to explain," her aunt continued, "that so many women write alike nowadays."

"Joan and I certainly do," exclaimed Edna, flushing deeply.

"But Mr. Amory wouldn't be familiar with your hand——"

She came to an abrupt silence, fixing her eyes on Lambert's face.

"I am afraid," said Edna, "I have a bad habit of leaving my letters about," and walking to the table she took up the envelope and put it in her pocket.

"Our one subject of contention!" cried Miss Thornhill in her normal manner. "My letters are naturally addressed the same as my niece's, and we generally quarrel before deciding who shall open them."

"Confusing," suggested Lambert, "to have two of the same name in a house!"

"Oh, well," answered Miss Thornhill, "before long there will be three of us——"

"Three Miss Thornhills!" gasped Lambert.

"Not quite so bad as that," said Edna, watching him, he thought, somewhat attentively, "but three Ednas."

"Extremely bewildering, is it not, Mr. Amory?" suggested her aunt, and Lambert was beginning to think it was, because he had now heard of an-

other "Edna" who might perhaps have been Mrs. Thornhill's guest five years ago, at the time of the intrigue with Alfred Chichester.

"Another niece?" he inquired.

"Only another god-daughter," was Miss Thornhill's reply.

"Then," he suggested, "you are expecting two guests——"

"Don't you understand," cried Edna, "that Miss Fletcher is the only one?"

"But her name, I understand, is Joan."

"Edna Joan Fletcher—to give it to you in full," said Miss Thornhill. "What seems so confusing," she explained, "is really a very simple matter. My god-parents at my baptism named me Edna; there you have the original Edna Thornhill. When my brother's second daughter was born I stood her sponsor, and she was named after me. There she sits—the second Edna Thornhill. A few months later," Miss Thornhill continued, "my friend John Farquhar, whose bridesmaid I had been, also had a girl, and again I was invited to take the responsibility. She also was named Edna—there you have the third Edna, Edna Joan Fletcher. When she stays here, or at my house at Paulhampton, she is

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called Joan, to prevent confusion; but everywhere else she is Edna."

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the simultaneous entrance of Mrs. Thornhill and the butler with afternoon tea.

"Oh, Mr. Amory!" she exclaimed, as Edna changed her seat, taking a chair by the octagonal table on which now stood the tray, "so very sorry I was out! So kind of you to come. Clara," she added, facing her sister-in-law, "is not quite so well to-day. I don't think you have met my married daughter, Mr. Amory! You would like Major Robbins, and they have the two sweetest little girls. If only there should be a boy——"

"Won't you sit down and have some tea, mother?" suggested Edna, and Lambert took the cup and saucer from her hand, passing them to Mrs. Thornhill, who spent the next ten minutes in an attempt to give Lambert an account of the state of affairs at the house in Portland Place, together with all Mrs. Robbins' hopes and fears, whilst Edna seemed equally bent on giving the conversation a less domestic turn. At last Lambert rose to say "good-bye," leaving the house with greater knowledge than he had brought to it. Not only had he discovered the existence of a third Edna,

but her handwriting had seemed familiar even before he had heard her name.

It was, however, indisputably true, as Miss Thornhill had suggested, that many women wrote much alike, especially when, as in the case of Edna and Miss Fletcher, they had been at the same school. Edna had indeed admitted that her writing bore a similarity to Joan's, and this proved the most significant fact which the afternoon had brought forth.

Lambert grew more eager than ever to find an opportunity of seeing Edna's handwriting, as also Miss Thornhill's, if only that he might employ a process of elimination. During the ensuing few days this object had the uppermost place in his thoughts, and then, almost by chance, the means seemed to be provided. He had set out one morning to walk to his club, when in Manchester Square he saw Miss Thornhill approaching, with some surprise, as it was not yet quite eleven o'clock.

She wore a wide-brimmed hat which suited her unusually well, whilst there was that in her mien which would have impressed any beholder with an idea of stately dignity.

"I am going," she explained, as Lambert raised

his tall hat and came to a standstill, "to one of my favourite places in London."

"Hertford House?" he suggested, seeing the small catalogue in her hand.

"And as you see," she continued, "I am going alone. Edna seems tied to Agatha Brownlow, and as for her mother, she cannot be dragged anywhere but in the direction of Portland Place. She even compels me to act as Edna's chaperon, although dances bore me to death. Now I could go to the theatre uncomplainingly night after night, but Edna doesn't seem so keen as she used to be——"

"I wonder," exclaimed Lambert, thinking he saw his opportunity in a roundabout way, "whether I might venture to suggest a small expedition?"

"To a theatre, do you mean?"

"With a dinner at a restaurant to begin with," said Lambert. "I might get Warbrook and another man to make up the half dozen."

"Perfectly delightful!" was the answer. "Although," she added, "of course I mustn't answer for anybody but myself. You should write to Mrs. Thornhill——"

"Unless," cried Lambert hastily, "you will be kind enough to speak to her, and let me have a letter this evening!"

One or two theatres were mentioned, an evening was suggested, and with a promise to write after luncheon, Miss Thornhill continued her way to the Wallace collection, whilst Lambert walked on, rejoicing in the fact that whether his invitation were accepted or refused, his object would be attained. In his impatience to see Miss Thornhill's handwriting he arranged to dine in Manchester Street that evening instead of at the club, as he had intended.

Mrs. Diggle sent up an excellent meal, over which he spent as much time as possible, reading whilst he seemed to be constantly listening for the postman's knock. Lambert had at last finished, and Diggle had carried out the tray, when there was a loud "rat-tat" at the street door. The next instant he re-entered with a letter on a salver.

CHAPTER X

CONCERNING OSWALD

LAMBERT AMORY'S hand shook as he put it out to take the letter, a glance at which convinced him that at least it could not have been written by the author of the Chichester letters. The hand was small and old-fashioned, sloping at an acute angle, with long loops running into the lines above and below.

He stood holding the unbroken envelope for some seconds after Diggle had left him alone. If it had been addressed by Miss Thornhill, she must assuredly be eliminated from the investigation. Opening the letter at last, he passed his eyes over the first page, beginning, "Dear Mr. Amory," and hastily turning to the second. There, to his acute disappointment, he saw that the signature was "Clara Thornhill," the letter having, in fact, been written by Edna's mother!

As might have been expected, it was unnecessarily long, the writer employing a great many words to explain that as she expected a visitor on Friday week, she could not leave home. Her sister-in-law and Edna would, however, be pleased to accept the invitation.

Now, why, Lambert wished to know, had not Miss Thornhill kept the matter, as she promised, in her own hands? It was true that Mrs. Thornhill might, quite conceivably, have insisted on taking it out of them; Lambert could imagine her the kind of woman to assert herself. But, on the contrary, Miss Thornhill had perhaps asked her sister-in-law to write in order to prevent him from comparing her hand with that of the Chichester letters.

After all his eagerness, it seemed an anti-climax, and as a consequence it still remained possible to suspect either of the three Ednas. His first impulse was to write to Mrs. Thornhill, proposing that she should come to his party and bring her guest, but a little reflection convinced him of the advantage of a personal interview.

In the first place, however, he determined to make certain of Hugo Warbrook, and soon after breakfast the following morning Lambert set out

in the direction of Bryanston Square—not without misgiving. He was accustomed to respect the convenances, and could not blind himself to the fact that he had taken advantage of a perhaps too slight acquaintance. Moreover, Lambert felt that Hugo regarded him just now with less than customary approval. It was remarkable for Warbrook to absent himself so long from Manchester Street, he being a man of expansive temperament, prone to pour his confidences into Lambert Amory's ears.

It was true that Hugo was passing through an unprecedented phase at present, and that there were moods when he could not help remembering how Lambert had behaved in Hyde Park a week ago. Also, Hugo was feeling greatly concerned about Oswald Sherval, who had actually been at Grandison Street, as he had gathered from a casual remark of Edna's, once already since last Saturday.

"I daresay," began Lambert, with a suggestion of embarrassment in his manner, "you'll be surprised, but I met Miss Thornhill yesterday——"

"Edna!" cried Hugo.

"The aunt," continued Lambert. "And on the spur of the moment I asked her and the others from Grandison Street to dine and go to the theatre."

Hugo, sitting at his writing-table, with his legs

stretched out beneath it, projecting on the other side, raised his eyebrows until his forehead became a mass of wrinkles.

"Oh, yes," he answered, looking down the next moment and fingering his blotting pad.

"For Friday week," said Lambert. "I thought of Henrico's for the dinner. You're not engaged?"

Hugo seemed a little uncertain whether he was or not. He was wishing that he had thought of doing something of the kind on his own account.

"Er—no, I don't think I've anything on," he returned at last.

"That's all right, then. I can count on your coming," said Lambert.

"Thanks, very much," cried Hugo, grudgingly, although he could not bring himself to miss the pleasure of spending the evening with Edna.

"I must get another man somewhere," suggested Lambert, turning towards the door.

"Oh, I say, old chap!" said Hugo, more in his ordinary cordial tone.

"Yes?" exclaimed Lambert, with his fingers on the handle.

"You're not going to ask Sherval?"

"He hadn't entered my mind," said Lambert.

"Upon my word, I can't stand the fellow," was

the answer, and then Hugo accompanied Amory to the street door.

Walking home, he cast about in his mind for a man to complete his party, without deciding by the time he set forth at four o'clock to Grandison Street. On this occasion again he was told that "Miss Thornhill" was at home, but on entering the drawing-room it became difficult to disguise his satisfaction on seeing Edna alone.

Still, his face looked impassive enough as he took her hand. Few persons would have imagined that Lambert was more than thirty years of age, and assuredly he appeared younger than Sir Hugo Warbrook.

"Shall I tell you the truth?" cried Edna brightly, as they both sat down. "Well, then, I stayed at home because I had an idea you might come."

"How can I express my gratitude!" he answered, and nothing went so far to convince him of her perfect innocence as her unmistakable and very desirable friendliness. Whereas she might have been expected to regard the discoverer of her secret with a certain amount of antagonism, nothing could have been more foreign to her treatment of himself.

Not that he did feel convinced. Try as he might to believe that the evidence was equally strong

against both Miss Thornhill and Joan Fletcher, perhaps he had never entirely succeeded in thrusting aside his original suspicion. But of one fact he was becoming more and more certain. Lambert had always striven to make Edna think that he was ignorant of the existence of those letters, concerning which, for one reason or another, it proved difficult to imagine she had not endeavoured to "pump" him. He inclined to the opinion that he must have succeeded, and that granting she was their author, she consoled herself by the reflection that they had never come under his notice.

"I wished to say," he continued, "that I hope Mrs. Thornhill will come, and bring her guest, tomorrow week——"

"In the face of her letter, I saw you could have no alternative," said Edna. "But we won't add to your number. I should like to bring Joan; and now," she added, "I am going to make a modest petition."

"It is granted beforehand," he returned.

"I fancy that is rather rash of you, Mr. Amory."

"I abide by my word," he said, with a smile.

"You promise?"

"Faithfully——"

"Well," she explained, "you spoke about a third

man. Aunt Edna said that Sir Hugo was to be one——"

"Have you any lucky chap in view?" asked Lambert, and now his mind misgave him. He guessed that she would name Sherval, whom he had promised not to invite.

"Oswald," was the answer, without the slightest sign of embarrassment.

"Of course," he exclaimed, "I shall be delighted." But he could not help wondering what Warbrook would say when he saw Sherval at Henrico's.

"Don't you like him?" she demanded.

"Oh, yes——"

"Then why do you look as if you would rather ask anyone else in the world?"

The impulse seized him to hint at the actual reason.

"You understand," he said, with his eyes on her face, "that he and Warbrook are not the very best of friends."

"Oswald," she returned, "is a great friend of mine."

"Perhaps that may have something to do with it," suggested Lambert.

She leaned back in her chair, gazing across at his face with a reflective expression. She was wear-

ing this afternoon a dress of the palest blue, fitting somewhat loosely, so that it suggested rather than defined the outlines of her slender womanly figure. Her dark-brown hair, loosely arranged, curled about her ears, which peeped out here and there. Lambert observed how small and transparent they looked. There was little about her that he did not seem to observe to-day; he had become surrounded by her influence, and her eyes, still resting thoughtfully on his own, came near to fascinating him.

"I am wondering whether I shall tell you," she murmured, appearing for her own part to be in a dreamy, languorous mood. The sunlight fell through one of the windows across her breast.

"I think you may," he said.

"Well, I will, although in a manner it will be a breach of trust. You know that Oswald is a great friend of my own; well, he is a still greater friend of Joan's."

"Do you mean that—that there is any kind of understanding between the two?" asked Lambert, whose eyes were suddenly opened.

"He has wished there might be any time these five years, since Joan was sixteen, and he was not

very much older. They used to play together as small children—of course you know."

"I know nothing about it," returned Lambert. "Although Oswald is distantly related to me, for all practical purposes we have always been strangers. So having played with him as a boy, Miss Fletcher declines to treat him seriously now?"

"Ah, well," said Edna, with a sigh, "*he* is serious enough. His circumstances were far from promising, and Joan has nothing. It was I who persuaded him to go into the bank. He hated the idea," she continued, "but he loved Joan, and there was no other prospect of their marriage. Oswald's sacrifice was really heroic in its way. Mr. Sherval stipulated that for two years he should act as an ordinary clerk, and you can't imagine the trouble I have had. He comes here every week, and I listen patiently whilst he discourses about Joan. About each alternate Saturday he threatens to revolt, and I lecture him into a better state of mind. Now," she added, "you understand why I made my petition."

"Does Miss Fletcher know the price he is paying?" asked Lambert, liking to think of her, for some occult reason, as Oswald's mentor.

"I have taken the precaution to tell her again and again."

"Still you are afraid she is not properly impressed?" he suggested.

"In order to keep Oswald at the bank," she explained, "I have found it necessary to dwell upon the glory of his reward——"

"Without feeling certain he will get it!"

"I used to feel certain," she said, "or naturally I should not have interested myself. The difficulty has always been his lack of worldly gear; but now he can boast of an income of seven hundred pounds a year, he insists that a beginning might be made."

"Do you agree with him?"

"My opinion scarcely matters. Oswald," exclaimed Edna, "declares that he will have an answer, 'yes' or 'no,' before Joan returns to Brighton, and this year she is only staying a few days."

"If," suggested Lambert, "Miss Fletcher should say 'no'——"

"I should be positively terrified at the consequences. He will be here on Saturday," she added. "Perhaps you would like me to let you know for certain whether he can come?"

Here, Lambert saw, was precisely the opportunity he had wished for; the opportunity of com-

paring Edna's writing, as far as memory served him, with that of the Chichester letters. Yet he felt sorry to hear the proposal. Their intimacy seemed to have grown by leaps and bounds during his prolonged visit. It was the first time that he had talked to her without an ulterior purpose; but this afternoon he had begun almost to ignore the question whether she had been a participator in Chichester's intrigue or not, remembering chiefly the fact, of which there could not be the remotest doubt, that she was the sweetest woman he had ever met.

"I imagine," he said, "after what you have told me, that he is sure to come."

"Still you would like to know for certain?"

"Then may I come on Sunday to hear?" he persisted, striving incongruously to prevent her from possibly exposing herself. Certainly, if she had written those letters, she must be egregiously positive that he had never seen them!

"Oh, please don't trouble," she returned. "Besides, I have promised to spend Sunday afternoon with my sister. I will write to you as soon as Oswald goes away on Saturday. And," she added, offering her hand as Lambert rose from his chair, "thank you immensely for letting me invite him."

CHAPTER XI

FRESH PROOF

OSWALD SHERVAL was popular in the counting-house, upon which he certainly felt that his presence conferred an honour. He passed out through the heavy mahogany swing-door at one o'clock on Saturday with sensations of extreme relief, inasmuch as he need not enter again before Monday morning.

There are men who, having made a great renunciation, are able to smother regret and give themselves whole-heartedly to the new life. Oswald was not one of them. He had never ceased to fret and fume against the fate which set him on an office stool for eight hours a day. He regarded himself as a determined, self-sacrificing martyr, who fully deserved the reward which he trusted lay in store. Not only had he worked (as he considered) very hard, but he had also been required to put his pride

in his pocket. Moreover, he had, during the last two years, practised an almost unnatural economy; out of his limited means he had actually succeeded in saving a certain sum which he fondly hoped might go towards the furniture of a small house or a flat for the reception of Miss Fletcher, whom he naturally wished to appreciate his self-denying virtues.

Surely she had given him some encouragement! It was true that he had already asked her four times to promise to become his wife, and that she had as oft refused! But hitherto she had been able to urge some kind of excuse, reasonably suggesting the absurdity of consenting to marry a man with less than three hundred pounds a year. Now, however, Oswald, having served his apprenticeship, counting also on an eventual partnership, determined that Joan should be brought to book.

On leaving the bank this Saturday afternoon he lunched at a restaurant, smoked a pipe afterwards in the billiard-room, then walked all the way to his rooms in Haslemere Street, Russell Square, where he changed his clothes, preparatory to setting out again, with the object of spending an hour with his guide, philosopher, and friend, Edna Thornhill. She received him in the small room behind

the dining-room, neither her aunt nor her mother putting in an appearance.

"I say, Edna," exclaimed Oswald, when she had given him some tea, "think of this day next week! What time on Friday do you expect her?"

"Before twelve," said Edna.

"When shall I see her?" he asked eagerly, and Edna told him about Lambert Amory's invitation for the same evening. Oswald made no attempt to disguise his satisfaction.

"Lambert," he insisted, "would never have thought of me if you hadn't put him up to it. But, look here, Edna," he added, "when can I see her alone?"

"Oh, well, I daresay you will be able to make an opportunity," she suggested.

"Anyhow," he said, "I mean to know just where I stand——"

"Still, you mustn't be impatient," she urged.

"Impatient! Well, I like that!" cried Oswald. "Besides, you have always told me it was certain to be all right."

"Of course, I—I hope it will be," she returned.

"You don't think there's any one else?" he demanded.

"I know of nobody."

"But if there were, you would be sure to know!" said Oswald. "A girl like Edna would have been married long before this if there hadn't been some reason. You've never," he continued reproachfully, "tried to throw cold water on me before."

"It is only," she answered, "that now the climax is coming, I don't wish you to feel too—too confident."

"Well," he exclaimed, "if Edna won't marry me I don't care a rap for anything!"

"Still," said Edna, with a smile, "you mustn't think of dying because a woman's fair."

"I've never seen anyone else quite like her," he insisted. "There's nothing I wouldn't do for her —and, you know, I have done a good deal."

"After all, you have succeeded in improving your position," suggested Edna.

"A fig for that!" he cried. "I went into the confounded bank because you said it was my only chance. If it were not for her I wouldn't stay in Lombard Street another twenty-four hours."

"But what else could you do?" she asked.

"Anyhow, it would have to be something cataclysmal," he retorted.

"Well," said Edna, with a sigh of resignation, "if you come to fetch us on Friday, you will see

Joan before we start. The dinner is at seven, so you can be here twenty minutes earlier."

As soon as Oswald had gone, Edna took a pen and sat down at the secretary by the window to indite her promised letter to Lambert Amory, who perhaps had never looked forward to the receipt of any communication so eagerly before, not even at the time when he used to cast his bread on journalistic waters, and any post might bring a proof.

He rejoiced that he had done nothing to induce her to write; quite the contrary, indeed. Still he warned himself that he might have to control his impatience until Monday morning. Although she had promised to write this Saturday afternoon, it did not follow that the letter would be posted in time for delivery the same evening.

Lambert sat down to his solitary dinner at eight o'clock, rising from the table at half-past the hour, and lighting a cigarette whilst Diggle removed the cloth; but before this was accomplished the street door bell rang, and a few seconds later Lambert heard Sir Hugo Warbrook's voice in the hall—the most unwelcome visitor he could, in the circumstances, imagine.

The fact was that Hugo had been reproaching himself on the score of coldness about the theatre

party, the present visitation being intended as a kind of *amende*. Nothing, he felt certain on reflection, could be more ridiculous than jealousy of Lambert, who, even if he admired Edna Thornhill, was the last man in the world to cut out a friend.

Now concerning Oswald Sherval, the case appeared different, and in the face of such a real cause for anxiety it seemed deplorable to create an imaginary difficulty. Hugo entered the room with his hand cordially held out, and Diggle was told to place the spirit stand, a syphon, and the box of cigarettes on the table. He was on the point of leaving the room, when Lambert, hearing the postman's knock, sat suddenly upright in his chair, wondering whether this was Edna's promised letter.

Nothing could have been simpler than to make certain that it should not be seen by Hugo, who might or might not be familiar with her handwriting. Lambert could have offered some excuse, have gone into the hall, and put the letter in his pocket, after a glance at the superscription outside the door.

Disdaining artifice, however, he remained in his chair, trying to concentrate his attention on Hugo's remarks about the Budget, until Diggle re-entered

with a salver, passing close to Warbrook on his way.

Hugo certainly had neither the wish nor the intention to pry into Lambert's correspondence, but his eyes wandered to the single letter on the salver, and drawing his legs beneath his chair, he could not disguise his astonishment on recognising Edna Thornhill's hand.

His forehead was full of wrinkles, he bit the end of his cigarette, wondering why on earth she should be writing to Lambert, who, with an apparent calmness, put out his arm to take the note. A glance sufficed to lower his spirits to zero. It was not necessary to open the envelope to assure himself that the writing closely resembled that of Chichester's correspondent.

It was true that Miss Thornhill had told him that Edna's penmanship was similar to Joan Fletcher's, whereas he had seen that this bore a likeness to the burnt letters. The fact, however, had never been so forcibly brought home to Lambert until this moment, when he sat with Edna's envelope in his hand, knowing that Hugo had seen it.

"Excuse me, old chap," he cried, as he hoped, in his customary voice, and breaking the seal, hastily read the brief contents, to the effect that Oswald

Sherval would be pleased to accept the invitation for next Friday, when he would escort the Grandison Street party to Henrico's restaurant. Looking at the signature, "Edna Thornhill," he felt absolutely certain that he had seen the first word of it at the foot of those incriminating documents which had been found amongst Alfred Chichester's possessions.

Being unwilling to raise a suspicion that the letter had any undue importance, Lambert, after a momentary hesitation, passed it over to Hugo, who took it with scarcely disguised eagerness. For an instant Warbrook's face cleared; he began to reproach himself for unworthy suspiciousness; he ought to be more carefully on his guard against this absurd jealousy to which he was becoming dangerously liable; for in a sense nothing could be more harmless than the tone of the letter, or more frank than Lambert's exhibition of it. Then his forehead wrinkled again.

"Upon my word!" he exclaimed, "I expected you would keep your word."

Lambert's face grew red, but he sat gazing at the cigarette which he held unlighted in his hand.

"Why in the world," demanded Hugo, "did you ask Sherval after promising you wouldn't?"

"I couldn't easily get out of it," was the answer. "You see, the idea was Miss Thornhill's."

"Still, you might surely have made an excuse of some kind."

"I couldn't see my way," said Lambert, and now he hesitated whether or not to tell Hugo the truth about Sherval. But he came to the conclusion that Friday would be quite early enough; on that evening Warbrook would see Oswald and Joan together and doubtless draw his own conclusions. When the scales fell from his eyes it was inevitable that a reaction should set in, and under its influence it was impossible to tell where Hugo would stop.

So that, notwithstanding some prickings of conscience, Lambert kept his own counsel, and, completely disappointed, Hugo went away earlier than he intended. Now Lambert took Edna's letter again, comparing it mentally with those which were causing him such heart-burnings, and trying to regard the affair with the detachment which had been easier in the beginning.

Edna's handwriting resembled that of the Chichester letters (Lambert felt convinced) more closely than Joan Fletcher's. Perhaps from the first, in spite of his endeavours to turn suspicion to Miss Thornhill, and afterwards to Joan, he had always

in his heart believed that Edna was guilty; that she had made the assignation with Chichester at Redhill, and kept it in due course; afterwards, however, refusing to repeat the experience.

Lambert undoubtedly believed this now, as also that she must have convinced herself of his ignorance of the existence of the letters before she could put this evidence in his way.

The situation still remained what it had been that night of the examination of Chichester's papers. Nothing had since occurred to make Hugo's enlightenment less desirable. Miss Thornhill, who had brought Warbrook and her niece together in the first place, undoubtedly believed that Edna would marry Sir Hugo if he asked her. But surely, in the circumstances, he must not be permitted to go so far.

In the end Lambert determined to do nothing before Friday, the intervening days passing without another visit from Hugo. Nor did Lambert go to Bryanston Square, although one evening he rang Warbrook up on the telephone for a few moments' conversation. On Wednesday, however, he was somewhat astonished to receive a visit from Oswald on his way home from the bank. He had

come, he explained, to thank Lambert for the invitation.

"To be candid," said Lambert, "you must thank Miss Thornhill. It was she who gave me the idea."

"A ripping good sort, Edna, isn't she!" exclaimed Oswald. "I suppose she's going to marry Warbrook?"

"You think she is?"

"Oh, well, it looks like it," said Oswald. "She thinks no end of the fellow, and of course the old lady would be immensely pleased. But what I really wanted," he continued, "was to make certain about the time on Friday. Women are never to be trusted about that sort of thing, you know, and I am to bring Edna and Miss Thornhill——"

"To say nothing of Miss Fletcher!"

"I say!" cried Oswald, "did Edna tell you?"

Having discovered that Lambert understood the precise situation of his affairs, Sherval sat down, lighted a cigar, and stayed another hour pouring his hopes and fears into unwilling ears.

CHAPTER XII

JOAN FLETCHER

OSWALD SHERVAL arranged to leave Lombard Street earlier than usual on Friday, in order to have ample time for the suitable adornment of his person, of which he was never neglectful. He made his way towards Haslemere Street, Russell Square, in jubilant spirits. For Edna Fletcher was in London! In a few hours he should have the gratification of seeing her face again, of touching her hand, sitting, no doubt, by her side at dinner, and subsequently at the theatre!

A year had passed since he had seen her or heard from her! But by this time she must have arrived at Grandison Street, and perhaps was looking forward to his coming. Oswald walked home on air, stopping by the way to be shaved for the second time that day.

On reaching his own room, on the second floor, he rang for some boiling water, and going to the

adjoining bedroom, inspected a new white waistcoat, finally spoiling four neckties before a bow had been formed to his satisfaction. When he had spent some time before the looking-glass, he instructed the landlady to send for a hansom, but denied himself the solace of tobacco on the drive to Grandison Street, where he arrived at half-past six, ten minutes earlier than the appointed time.

"Will you come this way, sir?" said the butler, but at the foot of the staircase Oswald hesitated, hoping that Edna might have manœuvred to arrange a preliminary private meeting with his beloved.

"Miss Thornhill didn't say I was to go to the smoking-room?" he suggested.

"No, sir; I had no instructions," was the answer, and Oswald must fain accompany the butler upstairs to the drawing-room, where he found Mrs. Thornhill sewing something white and small.

"The others will not be long," she said, offering her hand. "Although I fancy you must be before your time."

"You see, I hate to be late," murmured Oswald.

"That is quite right," was the answer. "As soon as I have seen you all start, I am going to dine with Clara——"

"Is Mrs. Robbins all right?" asked Oswald.

"Quite as well as can be expected," said Mrs. Thornhill, "though poor Major Robbins is really making himself ill—— Ah!" she added, as the door opened, "here is Edna!"

"Have you seen Joan yet?" she cried, coming towards Oswald with one hand held out, whilst on the other arm she carried a long white cloak and a feathery arrangement intended to be worn round her neck.

"Did she get here all right?" he inquired. Then suddenly withdrawing his hand from Edna's, he darted impetuously towards the door. "By Jove!" he exclaimed, as Joan entered the room, "how jolly it is to see you again! How ripping you look! What an age it seems!"

"Well, I suppose it's about a year," she returned, with a laugh.

"It might be ten," said Oswald. "Doesn't it seem like five at least?" he demanded, still holding her fingers.

Miss Fletcher was the shortest of the party; the plumpest, also. Her extremely fair hair was elaborately arranged on the top of her small head, whilst her skin was naturally so white that it might be wondered why she took the trouble to powder it

profusely. Yet in spite of her fairness, and of the fact that she was a few months younger than Edna Thornhill, she struck one, in some subtle way, as being the older. She wore a dark dress, which made her magnificent shoulders appear more dazzlingly white, and her arms were entirely bare. Her large blue eyes were somewhat prominent, and she seemed to possess the faculty of staring an average person out of countenance without blinking.

"How do you do, Mr. Sherval?" exclaimed Miss Thornhill, as she joined the others. "I don't know," she added, "whether you young people have heard that the carriage is waiting."

Oswald held Joan's cloak whilst she thrust her arms into its voluminous sleeves, and so far he had certainly nothing to complain of in her treatment. A few minutes later they were all being driven towards Piccadilly Circus, she sitting next to Miss Thornhill, under Oswald's devouring eyes.

"What is Mr. Amory like?" she asked. "I don't think I have ever seen him, have I, Edna? And," she continued, without waiting for an answer, "I am positively dying to meet Sir Hugo."

No doubt Joan had enjoyed the advantage of a private conversation with Mrs. Thornhill, and now she looked significantly at Edna, who felt glad, on

the whole, when the carriage stopped outside the restaurant, where Lambert had been recently joined by Hugo. He had set out from Bryanston Square without any expectation of enjoyment, whereas the sight of Oswald's radiant, handsome face as he helped Miss Thornhill out of the carriage by no means improved his anticipations.

"What on earth's the matter with the fellow?" Hugo whispered to Lambert, who seemed curiously preoccupied.

"Eh, what—who?" he exclaimed.

"There's that fellow, Sherval, grinning as if he had come into a fortune," said Hugo.

"Well, in a small way, he has, you know," answered Lambert, and the next minute Edna was introducing him to Miss Fletcher in the vestibule. But his interest in Joan had dwindled since he had received Edna's letter, and it was by no means revived to-night. On first hearing of the existence of this third Edna, Lambert had indeed felt extremely eager to meet her, but he could not now for an instant convince himself that Joan had any connection with the Chichester letters, and consequently his interest ended.

Yet, to judge by appearances, Lambert would unhesitatingly have selected Joan as, of the three, the

most probable delinquent. Although she could not be denied a certain kind of attractiveness, there was something, in Lambert's opinion at least, which made it far from difficult to imagine her as being a party to such an intrigue.

Hugo, when presently they went to the large dining hall, observed with increasing wonder that Oswald Sherval, neglecting Edna, kept as close as possible to Joan's side. Seated at the table which Lambert had reserved, she removed her cloak, displaying somewhat liberally, the most ravishing of figures; her voice, too, was the loudest; scarcely an unpleasant voice, but no doubt a little assertive.

She seemed determined to admire everything, and indeed Lambert had given considerable attention to all the arrangements.

"I chose this place," he explained, when Joan had expressed her approval of the flowers, "because it is only a few doors from the theatre."

"They always do you well at Henrico's," answered Oswald with the air of a connoisseur. The next instant he was stooping to whisper to Joan who sat at his right hand. Whilst Hugo ate his soup he could scarcely take his eyes off the pair.

"I suppose," he remarked, turning to Edna at

his side, "that Sherval and Miss Fletcher have met before to-day?"

"Oh, dear, yes, scores of times," she answered. "They have known each other since they were small children."

"They have the appearance," he suggested, "of being the most excellent friends."

"Excellent," she said, somewhat significantly, as Joan looked across the table at Lambert, and began to talk golf. It happened that he knew one or two men who lived and wrote at Brighton, and she appeared eager to exhibit her consummate ignorance of books in general.

"As long as I live," whispered Hugo, "I shall remember this evening."

"Is the dinner very remarkable?" asked Edna, who rejoiced to see Joan so amiable towards Oswald.

"My eyes seem to be opened," was the answer.

"Have they been long closed?"

"I suppose the fact is," he said, "I am not one of those fellows who are quick at seeing things."

"Slow and steady," suggested Edna, with her eyes on her plate.

"Anyhow," continued Hugo, keeping his voice low, "I am hoping to win the race before I have

done. I feel as if I had awakened in Paradise," he said.

She raised her eyes, glancing round the garish room.

"Is this your notion of it?" she asked. "But how you mix your metaphors, Sir Hugo! You must certainly have culled some flowers of speech by the way."

"You understand," returned Hugo, going perhaps farther than he had ever let himself go before, "I did not dream what was actually the point of interest between you and Sherval. A capital fellow!"

"Now, I had the idea that you did not much care for him," she suggested.

"Oh, but that was entirely a mistake," cried Hugo.

"Sometimes," answered Edna, "I think Oswald is the handsomest man I have ever seen. There really is something Byronesque about his face," she added, "and no doubt he does his best to live up to it."

Addressing Miss Thornhill, Edna tried to give the conversation a more general turn, marvelling that Lambert Amory should make so poor a host. He did not seem to have his guests well in hand,

although for that matter they all had the appearance of enjoying themselves. But there was a distinct tendency to fall into pairs, Lambert himself being left for Miss Thornhill, striving to avoid playing the ghost at his own feast. Nothing brilliant fell from his lips this evening.

"If I drink any more," said Joan, as Oswald pressed her to let her glass be refilled with champagne, "I shall run the risk of losing my head."

"I wish to goodness," he whispered, holding his extremely eager face close to her own, "you would lose your heart."

"You ought to have discovered by this time," she returned, "that I don't possess one. Really, it is quite fortunate; one gets along far better without such a useless incumbrance."

"I shouldn't mind keeping it for you," urged Oswald.

"Charity begins at home," she said, leaning back in her chair with her eyes on his face. She also could not help thinking how handsome he looked this evening.

"I can't see the application, don't you know," murmured Oswald.

"You must first learn to keep yourself," she retorted.

He emptied his glass and then bit his lip in obvious vexation.

"I thought Edna Thornhill had told you," he said, a few moments later.

"Told me what?—I have such a shocking memory!"

"Anyhow," answered Oswald, "I am able to muster seven hundred a year."

"Dear me! All that?"

"And a jolly grind it has been the last two years, I can assure you," he insisted.

"How extremely modest your ambition must be!" she cried. "Now my own expands every week I live—— Miss Thornhill is going to make a move," she broke off abruptly.

Oswald, whose glass had perhaps been filled oftener than he quite realised, felt a strong inclination to continue the discussion of his present income and all he had endured to procure it. He would have wished to dwell upon the amount of comfort which two persons of reasonable views might obtain on the strength of seven hundred a year, and finally rose from the table with the impression that the argument had been interrupted at an inconvenient stage, especially as it could not well be carried on at the theatre. In the vestibule there arose a de-

bate as to the mode of reaching it, Hugo deprecating Miss Fletcher's suggestion that they could run along the street.

His proposal that cabs should be chartered to take them the few yards, however, was unanimously negatived, and in the end he offered Edna Thornhill his arm, leaving Oswald to follow with Joan, whilst Lambert brought Miss Thornhill, than whom no one was more contented with the evening's experience.

She clung to the opinion that beneath some superficial differences, Sir Hugo and Edna had much in common, but hitherto she had been disappointed by Warbrook's backwardness. Concerning her niece, she experienced less doubt, believing that she would marry him if she were asked; whereas this evening Miss Thornhill saw determination in Sir Hugo's eyes.

CHAPTER XIII

AFTER THE PLAY

LAMBERT AMORY had booked six seats in the third row of the stalls, his own place being between Edna Thornhill and Miss Fletcher, who had Oswald Sherval on her other side. She seemed, however, to do her utmost to ignore him whilst turning to Lambert, from whom she exacted considerable attention: now requiring her cloak to be replaced about her shoulders, now dropping her programme, which he stooped to restore, now asking him to focus the opera-glasses.

Lambert, for his own part, was steadily forming an antipathy that would have appeared incomprehensible to Oswald. If Amory had been aware of Miss Fletcher's existence in the first place, he would not have entertained the slightest doubt as to her capacity (at least) for the intrigue. On the other hand, it was only fair to admit the absence of any evidence that she had actually stayed for several

weeks at Number 7 Grandison Street five years ago; there was no evidence of any kind, indeed, against Miss Fletcher, save her Christian name and the similarity of her handwriting to that of the Chichester letters. Even so, Edna Thornhill's seemed the more similar of the two.

"After all," said Joan, looking up rather languishingly into Lambert's face at the end of Act I, "the best thing about a play is discussing it afterwards."

"You prefer talking to listening?" he suggested.

"Oh, but I am ready to listen as long as you like," she exclaimed.

"The interval is only eight minutes."

"Though two years are supposed to elapse," said Oswald, leaning forward to get in his word. "I wish I could kill time that way."

Joan ignored his interruption. She had seen Lambert's name at the foot of various articles which she should never dream of reading, and had heard Miss Thornhill's opinion of him; moreover, he was a fresh acquaintance, and naturally she wished to make a favourable impression.

"Still," she returned, with skilful management of her eyes, "there may be other opportunities, Mr. Amory."

Finding himself neglected, Oswald leaned lightly against her arm, which she at once withdrew with a frown.

"I say, Joan!" he whispered.

"Well, what is it?" she demanded curtly.

"Edna has asked me to dine to-morrow."

"Surely you can't be thinking of another meal already," she retorted.

"What do you think?" he cried.

"Oh, please don't bother, Oswald," she said. "I like to do one thing at a time."

"Well," he persisted, "it's always the same thing with me, you see. Besides," he added, "I am not often invited to dinner nowadays, and when I am I'm almost certain to be kept late in the city."

"I wonder you put up with it," she answered.

"You know why very well," said Oswald, a little sentimentally.

"The game can be scarcely worth the candle——"

"But, seriously, Edna!"

"Oh, dear!" she rejoined. "Can't you understand that I don't wish to be serious? I decline altogether. I like to enjoy myself while there's a chance."

"Still," he urged, "you might let a chap have a look-in."

Lambert, leaning forward in his seat, saw that Hugo was whispering to Edna Thornhill, who sat with her eyes cast down as she had done since the curtain fell. Now it rose again, and sighing slightly, she looked at the stage. Amory wondered whether Hugo, relieved by his discovery concerning Oswald Sherval, might even ask her to be his wife before they left the theatre, until he consoled himself by the reflection that the place would probably not be considered sacred enough for such an enterprise.

Oswald was dividing his attention between Joan and the stage, whilst he marvelled at the change in her demeanour since leaving the restaurant, but indeed the attentions of a slave soon grew tiresome.

"Isn't this," she inquired, during the second entr'acte, leaning forward and addressing Edna Thornhill across Lambert, "the theatre where Alfred Chichester used to act?"

Edna did not seem to hear, but continued talking to Sir Hugo.

"It must have been several years ago, then," said Lambert, on the alert.

"Oh, yes, a century—an age! I must have been sweet seventeen." She paused, without hearing the expected rejoinder to the effect that a thing of beauty is a joy forever. "Edna ought to remember," Joan added.

"Why?" asked Lambert.

"She was most awfully smitten, you know. Now don't look as if you felt bored," she added, disregarding the rise of the curtain, "because every man, as well as every woman, enjoys scandal."

"Difficult to associate anything of the kind with Miss Thornhill," he suggested.

"Is that how Edna strikes you?" said Joan; "but then she used to be different in those days. Isn't it strange how people alter as they age! You really wouldn't recognise her!"

Her voice was somewhat loud, and a man behind murmured "Hush!" whereupon Joan became silent until the next interval, when she cut short a remark of Oswald's by deliberately turning her back.

"What were we talking about?" she said, leaning towards Lambert. "Oh, yes, I was telling you about Edna's being so gone on Chichester, wasn't I?"

"Perhaps you don't know he was a friend of mine," returned Lambert.

"No! Was he?" she continued. "Then I suppose I ought to be cautious of what I say about him."

"Should you be likely to say anything dreadful?"

"Oh dear no! He was far too handsome—the best-looking man I ever saw except Oswald. Edna used to think so—didn't you, Edna?" she asked, bending forward to speak across Lambert again.

"What—what is that?" said Edna, turning from Hugo.

"Did you not once think Chichester was the best-looking man you had ever seen?"

Edna's face grew crimson as Lambert rejoiced at the same moment to see the conductor return to his seat.

"She actually bought his photograph," explained Joan, with her lips close to Lambert's ear. "At least I imagine she bought it; anyhow, she used to treasure it in her jewel case."

Although she could scarcely have overheard the last remark, Lambert saw, as the curtain rose again, that Edna was in pain. He began to dislike Joan Fletcher more cordially than ever; she must have spoken from sheer malice, and have hurt Edna deliberately. Yet, he reminded himself, Joan probably had no idea of all that her words conveyed

to Edna, just as she was ignorant of their significance to himself.

Her elbow touched his coat sleeve as it rested on the arm of the stall, and it became difficult to repress a desire to console her, as if she were a child in trouble. Once, when she chanced to raise her eyes, meeting his, her lips curved in a wistful smile, which struck him as more pitiful than tears. He understood what any reminder of that unfortunate incident must mean in her present phase, in spite of what she doubtless regarded as her immunity from suspicion. Lambert could not have described any incident of the last two acts, and the final fall of the curtain took him completely by surprise. Sir Hugo was holding her cloak, whilst Oswald performed a similar office for Joan.

"I suppose you often come to Grandison Street," she exclaimed as they made their way out of the theatre.

Oswald went into the street to look for Mrs. Thornhill's carriage, and a few minutes later "Good-night" had been said, and Lambert stood by Sir Hugo's side as the four were driven away together.

"Shall we have a cab?" suggested Lambert, taking out his cigarette case.

"Rather a jolly night for a walk," said Hugo briskly, and taking Amory's arm in his old friendly manner, he crossed the road. "Look here, old fellow," he continued, when they had made their way through the crowd at the corner of the Quadrant, "I don't mind owning I felt a bit huffy when you told me you had invited the Thornhills."

"It isn't necessary," returned Lambert.

"But upon my word," cried Hugo effusively, "it's been the jolliest evening I ever had. I never spent such a time."

"That's all right," said Lambert.

Nothing could have been much more different than the humours of the two men this evening: Hugo in the highest spirits, towering above his companion whilst he hung on his arm, with an accent of jubilation in his voice; Lambert appearing curiously absent-minded and unresponsive, his eyes fixed on the pavement, his lips compressed.

"Of course," exclaimed Hugo, "I see daylight at last. I understand all about it. Blind if I didn't. Anyone must tumble to what's up between Sherval and Miss Fletcher. Edna has been simply the friend of both."

"Do you mean," demanded Lambert, "that you have been hanging back on Sherval's account?"

"Oh, well, my dear fellow, if it comes to that, I don't know about hanging back. But I couldn't quite make out what took him to Grandison Street week after week, you know. I daresay I'm a peculiar sort of chap—a bit jealous——"

"No peculiarity about that!"

"Anyhow, it's an immense relief," said Hugo, as they walked along Oxford Street. "Not only about Sherval—somehow, I seemed to see my path to-night. I came without much expectation, yet everything went just the right way from the beginning."

"Then you found Miss Thornhill——"

"A good deal jollier than she ever was before," cried Hugo, tightening his grip of Lambert's arm. "I shall go to Grandison Street to-morrow."

"Have you made an appointment?" demanded Lambert abruptly.

"Not exactly that," was the answer. "But you must know that I—well, I fished. Edna will be at home after luncheon, and I intend to send a note in the morning asking her to see me alone. She's going to see Mrs. Robbins at eleven, or I should turn up then."

Lambert did not answer, and as they walked along Duke Street Hugo continued to express his

hopefulness, promising to let Amory hear the result of the interview at the earliest possible moment.

"I fancy it will be all right," he insisted. "Of course it's difficult to tell—especially with a girl like Edna. She was immensely nice to me all the evening, but the worst of it is one can't make up one's mind whether or not she wouldn't have been just the same to any other chap. Anyhow," he continued, as they approached Lambert's door, "I shall know long before this time to-morrow. I sha'n't sleep a wink to-night," he exclaimed.

"Well, then," said Lambert, coming to a standstill, "the best thing you can do is to come in for half an hour."

"Oh, well, if I sha'n't be keeping you up."

There was still a light in the hall, and Lambert admitted Hugo with his latch-key. Hearing Amory's return, Diggle, who acted very much as his personal servant, came to help him off with his overcoat, attending to Sir Hugo first. Warbrook stood rubbing his large hands together briskly, as if it were breakfast time, but Lambert's movements seemed to be unusually deliberate.

Following them into the sitting-room, Diggle placed a box of cigars and another of cigarettes on

the table, with the spirit stand, and a syphon of seltzer water. He half filled two tall glasses, gave Sir Hugo the matches, and stood with his fingers on the door handle, as if awaiting further orders.

"Good-night, Diggle," said Lambert. "I will let Sir Hugo out."

"Good-night, sir."

"Good-night, Diggle!" cried Hugo.

"Good-night, Sir Hugo."

Then Lambert struck a match and lighted a cigarette, Hugo having helped himself to a small cigar. He leaned back comfortably in his chair, stretched out his long legs, clasped his hands behind his head, and blew a cloud of smoke in the direction of the ceiling, his own reflections being of far too agreeable a description to permit of his noticing Lambert's taciturnity.

CHAPTER XIV

A MIDNIGHT CONFERENCE

LAMBERT now found himself confronted by the most embarrassing and distasteful situation within his experience. He knew for a certainty that Hugo intended, to-morrow, to ask Edna Thornhill to marry him. On the other hand, he could not make up his mind whether her answer would be "yes" or "no."

But Miss Thornhill, who was in a position to judge, undoubtedly believed it would be "yes," whereas Hugo appeared equally confident. Lambert, however, knew that nothing could induce Warbrook to marry a woman who had participated in the Chichester intrigue.

Was it possible to refrain from enlightening him, to let him go his own way, become engaged to Edna, marry her in due course, whilst Lambert kept the knowledge of that unfortunate affair to himself?

Regarding any other man in the world but Hugo it might have been possible, because in the first place there might be a conceivable willingness to condone the offence. But in Warbrook's case there could be no such question. Moreover, Lambert had known him the last twenty years, since they were both small boys at the same preparatory school.

"The fact is," said Lambert, "I rather wished for a jaw with you——"

"Anything the matter?" asked Hugo, with difficulty bringing his mind back to earth.

"I should like your opinion," was the answer.

Hugo leaned forward, resting a hand for an instant on Lambert's knee.

"I thought you were looking a bit bothered at dinner," he said.

"An awkward fix!" Lambert explained, without a trace of emotion. "I happen to know a girl who is engaged to be married, and I have discovered a certain episode four or five years ago——"

"Serious?" asked Hugo.

He was bound to-night to measure every man's corn by his own bushel. A suggestion of the slightest slur on the character of another woman appeared

to heighten his conception of Edna's purity and perfection.

"Quite," said Lambert. "But understand, I know the girl fairly well. She has taken the lesson to heart. At the present moment she's fit to be the wife of any man."

"Humph!" ejaculated Hugo, gazing at the tip of his cigar.

Lambert sat upright in his chair, whilst the other sprawled; his hands were clasped round his right knee, which was slightly raised.

"There's no woman in the world," he exclaimed, "for whom I have a greater respect."

"Respect!" said Hugo with a short laugh.

"Respect," Lambert insisted. "I made the discovery——"

"Easy to guess how."

"Well—how?" demanded Amory.

"When you were examining Chichester's papers," suggested Hugo.

"Amongst them," continued Lambert stolidly, "were several letters which—well, there could be no question of their weight in the Divorce Court. The writer completely gives herself away. It's useless to mince matters: an assignation was made, there were twenty-four hours to be disposed of;

yet," said Amory, "I feel pretty certain no one knows but myself——"

"Impossible to be quite certain," remarked Hugo.

"No, not quite," Lambert admitted. "But I burned the letters, and I don't think the story can ever come out. Now, what ought I to do?"

He unclasped his hands and gripped the arms of his chair, turning to fix his eyes on Hugo. Lambert's face appeared almost expressionless as he awaited an answer.

"You say the woman is actually engaged?"

Lambert nodded assent, having the shadow of a fear lest Edna should be exposed too soon. Nobody could know better that this roundabout method was entirely unnecessary. Hugo's answer was a foregone conclusion, and Lambert had every intention to act in accordance with it.

"That is to say," suggested Hugo, "she accepted the man without an explanation?"

"Yes," said Lambert.

"But, of course," continued Hugo, "it goes without saying. Otherwise, he wouldn't have had anything more to do with her."

"You think not?"

"Why, my dear fellow, naturally. You insinuate that she is a decent woman——"

"She is," said Lambert. "She is of the salt of the earth." Hugo had never heard him speak in such terms of any human being before.

"Could any decent woman," demanded Warbrook, "possibly engage herself to a man and keep such a story in the background?"

"Imagine what the telling must signify!"

"Ah, yes," cried Hugo, "and imagine what her silence must signify to the man!"

"Where ignorance is bliss——"

"But murder isn't the only crime that will out," Hugo insisted. "And you haven't answered my question."

Lambert passed a hand slowly over his forehead.

"What was it?" he asked.

"Could any moderately decent woman allow a man to commit himself without telling him everything?"

"Yes," said Lambert, "I think she could."

"Well, I don't," answered Hugo, with considerable emphasis.

"I won't say," continued Lambert, "that she oughtn't to make a clean breast. It would be a counsel of perfection. But with such an immense

temptation to secrecy she might succeed in persuading herself she was justified."

"There's no question about one thing, old fellow," exclaimed Warbrook. "It's a horrible position for you to be placed in."

"Why, yes, it is," Lambert agreed. Every minute seemed to make it more horrible, yet his determination was still to speak plainly before he sent Hugo away. Only a few words were necessary to point the moral of the story, and until the present instant Amory did not intend to shirk them. "So you think," he said, "I ought deliberately to spoil two lives—his as well as hers?"

"They were spoilt by the woman four or five years ago, Lambert. It ought to be for him to decide, although there can be no doubt what he will do. My dear fellow," Hugo continued, leaning forward in his chair and raising a forefinger, "you know that I am the last man in the world to throw a stone; good heaven! I would do anything in my power to help the wretched girl, but not at the man's expense. He ought to know, he must know, and at all costs it's your manifest duty to tell him. A thousand pities you didn't speak before the beginning of the engagement."

For a few seconds Lambert remained silent,

gnawing his nether lip, and astounding Hugo by his apparent hesitation.

"Another thing," he exclaimed abruptly. "There is a kind of complication. For the sake of clearness I spoke as if I were perfectly certain——"

"Aren't you certain?" demanded Hugo.

"I have some evidence to go upon," Lambert explained. "I believe it was she who entered into the intrigue, but there is just the bare possibility of a mistake."

"My dear fellow!" cried Hugo, rising from his chair. "I quite understand how it is with you. I admit you are in a horrible position; but still it's no use to deceive yourself, and you can't run the least risk of letting him be deceived. Think of it——"

"Well, I have thought of it once or twice," said Lambert, "and I know he would have a good woman for his wife."

"Yes," was the answer, as Hugo brought a hand down rather heavily on Amory's shoulder, "and you know you have got to speak out."

It seemed that now was the time. Hugo muttered something regarding the lateness of the hour, but Lambert did not hear distinctly. He stood with his hands in his trousers pockets, whilst Warbrook

walked towards the door. The critical words were on the tip of his tongue, and they must be uttered within the next few moments.

Opening the door, Hugo went into the hall, taking his black overcoat from the peg.

"Let me give you a lift," suggested Lambert.

"Thanks, old man," cried Hugo, and Amory held the coat while Warbrook thrust his arms into its sleeves.

"I—I didn't ask you to have some more whiskey," said Lambert.

"No more," was the answer. Hugo stepped to the street door, buttoning his overcoat, then he turned the handle and went out on to the step, accompanied by Lambert.

"A glorious night," he exclaimed, gazing up at the star-lit sky.

He still seemed to be struggling with the sentence which must destroy all Hugo's hopes, and still, for some reason, the words did not come.

"By Jove!" said Hugo, as they stood together on the step, "this time to-morrow!"

Lambert's face was white to the lips. He could feel his own heart-beats.

"I'll let you know as soon as I leave Grandison

Street," Hugo continued. "Shall you be at home about half-past four?"

"As far as I know."

"Well, if I don't drop in, I'll ring you up," was the answer. "Good-night, old chap," he added, taking Lambert's hand. "By Jove! how cold you are!" he exclaimed.

For a second Lambert clung to Warbrook, as if with the intention of detaining him whilst yet he spoke the few necessary warning words. But even now he could not get them out.

"Good-night," he said, and stood gazing after Hugo as he walked blithely down the street, presently turning to his left and becoming lost to sight. Then Lambert went back into the hall, closing the door, shooting the bolts and putting up the chain. Re-entering his sitting-room, he mixed himself a stiff glass of whiskey and seltzer-water, then sat down, bending forward with his hands pressed between his knees.

It amounted to this: he could not utter to Hugo or anyone else a sentence in disparagement of Edna. The words had seemed to hang upon his lips, but there they stayed. He had set himself to speak, and he could not.

But, nevertheless, Lambert did not feel able to

run the risk of allowing her to accept Hugo within a few hours. As far as he understood himself, he was going to act disinterestedly. Whatever might be his own desires, he intended to put them aside. But knowing Hugo as he did, having listened to the vehement expression of his opinion this evening, Lambert could not let things go on.

With no thought of bed, as yet, he sat for two hours or more after Warbrook's departure, turning things over in his mind. It appeared obvious that Edna had persuaded herself (thanks, no doubt, partly to Lambert's imperturbable demeanour, to say nothing of his endeavour to mislead her) that he remained ignorant of her intrigue. If she loved Hugo, the temptation to marry him, despite the Chichester episode, must prove overwhelming, and she believed that she could do so with entire immunity.

But if she were to learn that Lambert knew all about it, then her outlook would be absolutely different. He shrank with loathing from telling her, yet, on the whole, this seemed the course least painful to herself. The barest hint would be enough! A hint also that Hugo must be enlightened before he was accepted. Distasteful as the prospect ap-

peared, Lambert preferred even this to telling Warbrook behind her back.

Edna must be compelled to understand that the truth ought to be told, and there should be no further delay. Fortunately, he knew that she was going to see Mrs. Robbins, in Portland Place, at eleven o'clock on Saturday morning—it had been Saturday some hours ago—and there it might prove possible to intercept her.

Wisely or unwisely, that was the determination he arrived at, whilst yet reminding himself that any kind of intervention might be unnecessary. Hugo had insisted that no decent woman could dream of accepting a man without a preliminary confession; but then Warbrook usually formed straightforward, downright opinions. Lambert certainly considered that, for his own part, he reasoned with more subtlety. At least he could not judge Edna harshly if she followed the line of least resistance.

He went at last to the adjoining room to bed, but even then he could not sleep. He thought of the blow in store for her when she learned that he had known her secret from first to last, and he sincerely wished that his mind were so constituted that he could stand by and allow Hugo to go his way without interference.

CHAPTER XV

IN PORTLAND PLACE

LAMBERT had little appetite for his breakfast on Saturday morning, and for the first time since the evening of Mrs. Thwaites's dance he looked forward to meeting Edna Thornhill without agreeable anticipations.

Hugo had said she was to go to Mrs. Robbins' at eleven o'clock, but as she probably did not intend to bind herself down to that exact hour, and as it was vitally important not to miss her, Lambert set out unnecessarily early, and, much as he disliked waiting about, reached Portland Place at ten minutes to eleven. Having already found the number of Major Robbins' house in the Directory, he paced to and fro a few yards away with increasing impatience, until he saw Edna approaching on the opposite side of the way.

She had chosen it, perhaps, because she was the

kind of woman who would naturally choose the sunny side. Surely, thought Lambert, life ought to be kind to her. He, for his part, had certainly no desire to be anything else, although fate seemed to necessitate the infliction of pain this morning. Edna looked entirely happy and cheerful as she drew near, without, as yet, having seen who was waiting for her.

Crossing the road, Lambert raised his hat, bringing her to a sudden standstill. Still, her sensations appeared quite pleasurable, as she smiled and held out her hand.

"I could scarcely believe my eyes," she exclaimed as they stood a few yards from her sister's door.

"The fact is," he returned, with portentous gravity, his arms akimbo, a walking-stick in one hand, gazing down into her upturned face, "I heard you were coming this way."

"So you—you are here to meet me?" she suggested.

"Should you mind walking a few yards?" he said, and they moved on together, Edna glancing rather apprehensively at Mrs. Robbins' dining-room windows as she passed the house.

"Is anything the matter?" she inquired, and he

told himself, as he watched her profile, that she was even now unsuspicious of his purpose.

"Oh, well," murmured Lambert, and stared straight ahead. He began to fear that the task he had undertaken might prove beyond his strength.

"If there is anything I can do to—to help you in any way," she suggested diffidently.

He walked along the broad pavement towards Marylebone Road, tempted to make some excuse and give up his design. Very few people were about, an occasional motor car passed, and one or two tradesmen's carts drove up to the kerb.

"I want you," he said, "to imagine the case of a—a girl who, some—some years ago, made a—a great mistake."

Forcing himself to look at her face now, he saw every particle of colour go out of it. Even her lips were pale, whilst for an instant she seemed to stagger, as if she were losing control of her limbs.

Lambert realised that he had destroyed her fond illusion; that he had suddenly disclosed the fact that the knowledge of that would-be forgotten episode was no longer limited to herself. For an instant he experienced a desire to cast aside all disguise and speak with perfect frankness, but the next became convinced that he must deal only in innuendos.

At this climax he could not refrain from admiration of her pluck. She was silent for a few seconds, obviously striving to regain complete self-command. When at last her lips, less pallid now, parted, her voice was low, indeed, but it scarcely faltered.

"It is not in the least difficult to imagine that," she said.

"The knowledge of the mistake came accidentally to my ears," continued Lambert, as they reached the end of Portland Place and turned to their right, "but, as it happens, a friend of my own intends—intends to ask her to marry him." Edna's cheeks were crimson now, and her eyes were bent on the pavement. "How do you think," he asked, "that I ought to act?"

"Why," she exclaimed, "don't you adopt the simple and straightforward course of—of telling your friend all you—all you know?"

"Anyhow, I could not do that," he returned.

"Surely it would be the safest course," said Edna.

"You see," he explained, "I am as anxious to spare her unnecessary pain as to make certain he doesn't take a leap in the dark."

"Doesn't she deserve a little pain?"

Lambert fancied that she shivered although they were walking in the sunshine. There were more

people in the street here, and passing vehicles made it necessary for him to stoop, bringing his ear closer, so that he should not miss her almost whispered words.

"She deserves nothing but honour, respect——"

Now for the first time since what he regarded as her disillusioning, she turned to meet his eyes.

"Mr. Amory," she faltered, "you are extremely inconsistent."

"How?" he demanded.

She hesitated for an instant, then turned to walk back the way they had come.

"To talk of honour—of respect for a woman who, with the record you suggest, could allow any man to become engaged to her in ignorance. I suppose that is what you are afraid of."

She quickened her pace, so that they were soon in Portland Place again, approaching Mrs. Robbins' house.

"Her temptation," he urged, "might be enormous. And there could not fail to be the consciousness of her own essential fitness."

"Ah, well," she said, "you need have no fear, Mr. Amory."

"You—you think not?" he persisted.

"None in the world," she returned, and stopped a few doors from the house.

"You will forgive me?" he murmured. She broke into a rather mirthless laugh.

"For asking my unbiased opinion?" she exclaimed.

"Well, good-bye," said Lambert, and bowing, without speaking again, she hastened on the short distance to her sister's door. Lambert stood watching as Edna waited on the step, but she did not look again in his direction, and having seen her enter the house, he bent his steps towards Manchester Street, wondering whether or not he had adopted the most judicious course.

It amounted to this, he told himself. He had warned Edna of the existence of a spectator. It was almost as if he had set her on guard against secret, unsuspected, prying eyes—his own. She knew now that she could not act as though the past were buried.

Would she make a confession to Hugo this afternoon, or simply refuse to marry him? Lambert began uncomfortably to perceive that he might never be in a position to understand her actual motive. Suppose she gave Hugo Warbrook "no" for his answer, Lambert could never tell whether she acted

from dread of exposure, or from a sincere wish to have nothing further to do with Hugo. And if, on the contrary, Warbrook rang him up this afternoon with the news of his acceptance, how could Lambert feel satisfied that she had told the truth? Hugo would naturally make no reference to such a subject, whereas, the engagement an accomplished fact, how could Lambert further interfere?

But although such thoughts did undoubtedly pass through his mind, Amory had no fear. If she told Hugo, he would quickly draw back; nothing would, surely, induce him to marry her. And for the rest, her assurance, for it amounted to this, could be accepted without reservation.

Hugo, in the meantime, unconscious of what was going on underground, awoke that morning with the conviction that, for better, for worse, the present was likely to prove the most important day of his life. Before it ended he should know for certain whether Edna would marry him. At breakfast he marvelled that he could ever have harboured a doubt as to the desirability of marrying her. His meal ended, he began to consider details, and, sitting down, wrote a few lines begging for a private interview at half-past three the same afternoon.

Summoning a footman, he gave explicit instruc-

tions that the letter should be delivered at Grandison Street with a message to the effect that it was intended for the younger Miss Thornhill, and by no means for his friend from Paulhampton.

The note reached its destination at half-past eleven—the butler taking it to the drawing-room, where Mrs. Thornhill was sitting with her sister-in-law; Joan Fletcher having left the house a few minutes earlier to visit an aunt, from whom she had expectations, in the neighbourhood of Chiswick, whence she was to return soon after luncheon.

Whilst Miss Thornhill read and talked at intervals, Mrs. Thornhill busily sewed one of the small, white garments which formed her chief occupation just now.

"Miss Edna Thornhill," she said, reading the address on the envelope.

"Sir Hugo's man said it was for Miss Edna," explained the butler in a confidential tone.

When he had left the room the two women turned and gazed intently into each other's eyes.

"Now this is extremely mysterious," cried Miss Thornhill.

"Extremely significant," suggested her sister-in-law, and rising, she put the letter on the mantelshelf, growing more impatient every second for

Edna's return. She was not expected, however, until one o'clock, and Mrs. Thornhill was surprised at half-past twelve when she heard the street door bell, followed by light footsteps on the stairs. Instead of stopping at the drawing-room, however, they went on to the next landing.

"Surely that must have been Edna," said Mrs. Thornhill.

"If so, she is earlier than you expected," was the answer.

"Perhaps Clara is not so well," cried Mrs. Thornhill, with an anxious expression.

"In that case Edna would have told us at once," returned her sister-in-law.

Mrs. Thornhill rose from her chair, and going upstairs, tapped at the bedroom door, which she found locked.

"I will be down directly, mother," cried Edna, and Mrs. Thornhill returned to the drawing-room, glancing at Hugo's letter as she entered.

"My dear child, what is the matter?" she demanded in alarm a few minutes later, as her daughter crossed the threshold.

"Why," answered Edna, forcing a smile, "nothing, of course."

"But, my dear child, you can't be well," Mrs.

Thornhill insisted. "And why have you come home so early?"

"I—I have the most wretched headache," was the answer.

"Is Clara pretty well?"

"Oh, yes; very well, indeed. She was watching for me at the window," added Edna. "I happened to meet Mr. Amory near the door."

Miss Thornhill, a closer observer than her sister-in-law, could not help thinking that Edna's manner was very extraordinary this morning. She had set out in excellent spirits to Portland Place, whence she had returned obviously in distress. It seemed that she mentioned Mr. Amory's name unwillingly, whilst yet there could be no need to mention it at all. But perhaps Clara had witnessed the meeting, in which case she would remark upon it to her mother, and Edna preferred to be beforehand.

"My dear," said Mrs. Thornhill, "there is a letter for you on the mantel-shelf."

"Is there?" cried Edna, going to take it in her hand. "Oh," she added, "from Sir Hugo."

"I wonder what he can want?" said her mother, as Edna broke the seal.

Two pairs of eyes were upon her, as she stood, breathing quickly, whilst she read the letter. They

saw her mantling colour, heard her faint sigh. Then she stepped forward, handing the note to Mrs. Thornhill.

"May I show it to your aunt, dearest?" she asked a few moments later.

"Why, yes, of course," was the answer.

Miss Thornhill read it in silence and returned it to Edna, who folded it deliberately and left the room.

"Now I wonder," cried Mrs. Thornhill, as the door closed, "whether she will accept him?"

Miss Thornhill stared gravely down at her open book.

"You don't tell me what you think," urged her sister-in-law.

"I really don't care to prophesy."

"But you have always insisted that Edna was fond of him," cried Mrs. Thornhill.

"Still," murmured Miss Thornhill, "there's many a slip betwixt the cup and the lip, you know."

She scarcely spoke during luncheon, for which Edna seemed to have little appetite; Miss Thornhill's eyes often turned in her niece's direction, and indeed Edna had an uncomfortable feeling that she was being kept under observation.

CHAPTER XVI

SIR HUGO'S ANSWER

WHEN Joan Fletcher returned to Grandison Street at a quarter past three she was greeted by the interesting news that Sir Hugo was expected in a quarter of an hour. Mrs. Thornhill apologised for keeping her out of the drawing-room, which must be reserved for his use.

"I insisted that Edna should rest after luncheon," said Mrs. Thornhill. "The poor child has the most dreadful headache—unfortunate to-day! I have just called her, and she will be down directly."

"What are the odds?" asked Joan.

"The odds!" cried Mrs. Thornhill.

"Oh, well, is Edna going to have him?"

"That is more than I can tell you," was the answer. "I can only say that I feel certain Sir Hugo would make a good husband——"

"I suppose that tooth powder is a fortune, isn't

it?" suggested Joan. "I always use it, you know," she added with a laugh.

Willing as Mrs. Thornhill might be to hear of Edna's engagement to Hugo, she would scarcely have attempted to exercise pressure, even if she imagined it could prove efficacious. When she had ventured, on rare occasions, to remark upon Sir Hugo's frequent visits, Edna had insisted that in all probability she should continue to end her days in single blessedness. "Aunt Edna seems perfectly happy over it," she said.

That, of course, sounded ridiculous, and Mrs. Thornhill felt almost as anxious as it was possible even for Edna to feel, when the bell rang at half-past three to the second.

"Miss Thornhill," said Sir Hugo, when the butler opened the door. "Not Miss Thornhill of Paulhampton," he added, as he was conducted upstairs to the drawing-room, where Edna was standing by one of the windows. Turning as he entered, she offered her hand, keeping her eyes averted, and from the first Hugo was conscious of something unusual, of something painfully self-conscious in her demeanour.

Her colour came and went as, retaining her hand, Hugo, in a few straightforward, manly words, told

his love and asked her to be his wife. But before she had time to part her lips to answer he began to feel seriously alarmed.

"Sir Hugo," she murmured, "I am sorry, but it is quite out of the question."

Releasing her hand, he stood for what seemed a long time with his eyes on her face, his own working as if he found it difficult to maintain self-control. His lips twitched, his eyes blinked; his long limbs appearing to be more loosely hung than ever, as though he had grown suddenly limp.

"You see," he said, breaking the silence at last, "we have always been such first-rate friends, that I couldn't help hoping——"

"Can't we be first-rate friends still?" she suggested, but even her voice sounded unusual.

"Ah! but I am afraid I have become too exacting," he returned. "I have learned to aspire to more than that." He could not quite make out what was different about her this afternoon, but her eyes seemed to wear a pitiful expression, and there could at least be no doubt concerning her sadness. "Upon my word," he exclaimed, the wish perhaps being father to that thought, "I believe you really are sorry you can't give me more. If there is any reason——"

"Any reason!" she echoed.

"Why you feel bound to refuse me; any obstacle of which I am ignorant——"

"Oh, well," she answered, "naturally you would be."

She continually averted her eyes, and every second served to convince him more firmly that something was being kept in the background. She laboured under a depression which could not be shaken off.

"Can't you tell me all about it?" he urged.

"Oh, but I couldn't," she answered.

"Because it might be something one could get over," he said.

"It isn't, Sir Hugo," she insisted.

"Well, if that is really the truth, I am immensely sorry," he exclaimed, and as she made no reply, he took her passive hand again, and, making his way to the hall, was let out of the house by the butler. Walking away, he realised miserably that the pleasant hours to which he had grown accustomed in Grandison Street could not be continued. Edna had become intimately woven into the warp of his life, and he knew how hard it must prove to put her out of it.

Mrs. Thornhill, sitting in the dining-room with

her sister-in-law and Joan Fletcher, rose from her chair as she heard the street door shut. Joan and Miss Thornhill exchanged significant glances as she walked to the door. She could endure the painful suspense no longer, and going hastily upstairs found Edna standing precisely where Hugo had left her, in the middle of the room.

"Well, darling?" exclaimed Mrs. Thornhill, placing an arm about the girl's waist.

"I suppose you will be disappointed," answered Edna with a quivering lip.

"If you tell me you have sent Sir Hugo away!" said her mother.

"Didn't you hear the door shut?" cried Edna, forcing a smile; but the next instant she quite broke down, and flinging her arms about Mrs. Thornhill, began violently to sob. Since Edna was a very small child she had never behaved in such a manner, and for the moment Mrs. Thornhill put aside all thoughts of Sir Hugo in her attempt to soothe her daughter, whom presently she led to her own room.

"I really cannot understand it," said Mrs. Thornhill, alone with her sister-in-law, a little later. "The poor child cried as if she were broken-hearted."

"Well, perhaps she is," exclaimed Miss Thornhill, biting her lip in vexation the next instant.

"What in the world do you mean?" demanded Mrs. Thornhill. "There could be nothing to prevent her from marrying Sir Hugo if she wished. Unless," Mrs. Thornhill continued, "that Agatha Brownlow has led her astray. God forbid," she cried, "that I should discourage anyone from doing good. But what would become of the world if every woman set her face against marriage?"

Without attempting to answer this perplexing question, Miss Thornhill returned to Joan, who was naturally curious to hear what had passed. Miss Fletcher's thoughts turned much on marriage at all times, but especially just now. She certainly had never seen Edna with such a miserable face as when she joined the others in the drawing-room before afternoon tea was quite finished. She had scarcely a word to say, while her aunt was equally taciturn, Miss Thornhill's eyes being fixed on Edna's face as constantly as they had been during luncheon.

"It is almost a pity," remarked Mrs. Thornhill presently, "that Oswald is coming this evening."

"Oh, Mrs. Thornhill!" cried Joan. "I hope you won't mind, but I told Mr. Franks he might call."

"Is that some one you met at Chiswick?" asked Mrs. Thornhill.

"Oh, dear, no!" was the answer. "Nothing good could come from that house. Willoughby Franks; he is a friend of my people at Brighton."

"A young man, my dear?" suggested Mrs. Thornhill, with sentimental interest.

"Oh, well, not exactly young. I think young men are rather a bore, you understand. So very angular until they pass thirty. Willoughby Franks is older than that, though; he must be about forty-five. Have you met him, Edna?"

"Once or twice," returned Edna, in a tone which might have signified that this had been quite often enough. She did not like the little she had seen of Willoughby Franks, whereas she began to fear that his visit might prove ominous for Oswald Sherval.

"He has a house at South Kensington," Joan continued, "and another just opposite the Brunswick Lawns, as well as a place in Somersetshire. You won't mind his calling?" she asked.

"My dear child, not in the least!"

Then a silence fell upon the four, Edna thinking chiefly of Oswald, whilst Miss Thornhill gazed out at one of the windows with her forehead puckered,

reflecting upon many things, amongst them of Sir Hugo, who, on leaving Grandison Street, had at first intended to go direct to Bryanston Square, letting Lambert Amory know over the telephone of his untoward fate. Approaching Manchester Street, however, he determined to look in on Lambert, who had stayed at home in the expectation of such a visit.

"Well," he demanded, striving to dissemble his interest as Hugo entered the sitting-room, "what's the news?"

"The worst possible," said Hugo, flinging himself into an armchair.

"Sorry, old chap," answered Lambert, feeling like a humbug, although it was true that he regretted Hugo's unequivocal pain. If it appeared that Lambert had been the cause, that was surely a superficial view. Amory had been only a pawn in the game. His intervention was the inevitable result of what had occurred five years ago.

"I suppose it's the fortune of war," exclaimed Hugo, "but it's no use pretending I'm not hard hit. It's difficult," he continued, "to understand a woman, but upon my soul, Edna—— Well, I couldn't make her out."

"Where was the perplexity?" asked Lambert.

"I scarcely know how to tell you," said Hugo. "I'm not a good hand at explanations. But there's no doubt she was unlike herself from the outset. You see, she had got my letter, and guessed why I was coming. I have never seen deeper sadness on a woman's face."

"Then you gather from that——"

"I tell you I don't understand it. She was upset about something. Why shouldn't it be because she was refusing me?"

Lambert also wondered whether it was so. Granting that she loved Hugo, assuredly her position had become a painful one; confronted as she must have been by the necessity either of refusing him or making such a confession. Well, she had refused him, and it seemed to Lambert to be vitally important to know why.

Because it might be that she would have declined in any circumstances to become Hugo's wife. On the other hand, she might have answered "no" only in consequence of what took place near Mrs. Robbins' house that morning.

Even if she suffered no disappointment in sending Warbrook unsatisfied away, Lambert thought her sadness might easily be explained, inasmuch as she had learned beyond a doubt that the knowledge

of the Chichester intrigue was no longer limited to herself.

"Anyhow," said Lambert, "you are not convinced that your case is hopeless, even now?"

"I can't grasp it, and that's the fact," was the answer. "I don't pretend to be able to explain. It seems ridiculous to imagine there can be anything in the background, but, you know, one can't help believing ridiculous things now and then, and sometimes they turn out true. You may say I'm a bit of a coxcomb, but—well, old chap, I do really fancy she cares for me a bit."

"Although she refused to marry you?"

"Yes, although she refused to marry me," returned Hugo. In his eagerness to find support for his own opinion he entered into somewhat minute details, Lambert listening for the most part without interruption. He was struck by the abrupt variations of Hugo's mood; even during the hour he spent in Manchester Street it changed several times, now despondent, now almost hopeful, now despondent again.

"Anyhow," he said, by way of a summing up, as he rose to go away, "I won't admit I'm beaten yet."

CHAPTER XVII

WILLOUGHBY FRANKS

JOAN FLETCHER extended to Oswald a cordial welcome when he arrived that Saturday evening—Mrs. Thornhill's only guest besides those who were staying in the house. The fact was that Joan, for once, began to find things a little dismal in Grandison Street. Edna seemed unable to muster a smile, Miss Thornhill looked equally solemn, whilst the hostess could not entirely succeed in disguising her chagrin at Sir Hugo Warbrook's rejection.

The consequence was that Joan yawned several times between tea and the time to dress for dinner. She considered that, at the best, four women in a house, with no man but the butler, were too many, and when Oswald arrived, a few minutes before eight o'clock, she was prepared to make the best of him. He, for his part, had felt somewhat discouraged by Joan's demeanour at the theatre the

previous evening, but this was soon forgotten now he could bask again in the sunshine of her smiles.

He stayed until eleven o'clock, and before bidding Mrs. Thornhill "good-night," hinted that he should be coming in the same direction on Sunday afternoon.

"Well," cried Edna, "we will promise to give you some tea."

Oswald went away with a sense of satisfaction which approached solemnity. He had seen Joan at her best this evening, and (blessed thought) he should see her again to-morrow. This was, however, the calm before the storm. On entering Mrs. Thornhill's drawing-room at a quarter-past four on Sunday afternoon, it seemed to be pervaded by a different atmosphere; between the door and the nearest window sat Joan, and at her side Mr. Willoughby Franks, a well-preserved, youthful-looking middle-aged man, somewhat short, sleek, with a tendency to stoutness, and thin, smooth black hair.

His shaven jaw and upper lip looked remarkably blue, his rather prominent nose was aquiline, and, appearing to ignore Mrs. Thornhill and the others, he was talking to Joan of their common interests at Brighton. She fixed her ingenuous blue eyes on his face as if she were reluctant to lose a word, and

it was only after Oswald had greeted his hostess, and Edna and her aunt, that Miss Fletcher deigned to notice his presence. Then she offered a limp hand, and, without speaking to him, turned again to Franks.

"You have heard of Mr. Sherval," she cried. "We have known each other all our lives."

Franks also gave Oswald his hand.

"I think," he answered, "I've seen Mr. Sherval before."

"Oh! ah! yes, at the bank," said Oswald, colouring furiously, for Franks had long been a valued customer at Sherval's, and Oswald, during his two years' probation, had often brought his pass-book to the counter. It is to be feared that Oswald now became conscious of a kind of inferiority which increased his already unenviable sensations, although neither Joan nor Franks could have been aware of them, as they continued their engrossing conversation.

Sitting down, Oswald began to fidget in his chair, making himself and the three members of the Thornhill family exceedingly uncomfortable. Edna did her best to carry on a desultory conversation under difficulties, whilst Oswald tried to overhear what Joan was talking about. Franks was urging

her to ride with him the following morning, and now Miss Thornhill, whose face wore the same preoccupied expression which had struck Oswald last night, offered Joan a mount.

"I don't think I shall ride to-morrow," she said, "but that is no reason why you should not."

"And Edna," suggested Mrs. Thornhill, for the sake of propriety.

Oswald had the mortification of hearing Franks arrange to call for them at eleven o'clock on Monday, and then he shook hands all round and went away.

"Fancy your knowing Mr. Franks!" exclaimed Joan, turning quite amicably to Sherval.

"For that matter," was the significant answer, "every one in London knows the fellow."

"Oh, yes," she said, "and every one in Brighton, too."

Unable to feel certain of controlling himself any longer, Oswald muttered something about another engagement and lost no time in returning to Haslemere Street, where, having fortified himself with a stiff glass of whiskey and water, he sat down to relieve his pent-up emotions by writing to Edna Thornhill. He was not a fool, he assured her, to be played fast and loose with. If Joan meant to

marry that fellow Franks, there was no accounting for taste, but at least she ought to be off with the old love before she was on with the new. Oswald insisted that he should come again to Grandison Street as soon as he could get away from the city on Monday, when he hoped Edna would arrange for him to see Joan alone.

The letter, covering four pages of notepaper, reached Edna's hands on Monday morning at breakfast time, and presently, inveigling Joan to her bedroom, she insisted that Miss Fletcher should read it.

"Has poor Oswald lost his senses?" she cried at the end of the first page.

"He does write as if he were a little unhinged," said Edna, "but you must admit that he is enduring a rather painful suspense."

"Well, you can't surely blame me for that," was the answer. "Four times he has asked me to marry him, and as he had less than three hundred a year I naturally said 'No, thank you.' "

"But now he has seven hundred," suggested Edna.

"My dear child, you don't imagine I should dream of trying to live on anything like that! I

would sooner stay where I am, if you have no objection."

"Anyhow," said Edna, a little wearily, "Oswald is coming to see you this evening, and—well, he will ask for a decided answer."

"If we don't get into our habits," was the answer, "we shall have the horses here."

Joan's conscience was troublesome enough to make her sincerely wish Oswald a thousand miles away. She realised that there had been nothing resembling finality about her previous refusals, but then Willoughby Franks had not appeared on the scene. The fact was that Oswald Sherval's face made him a little hard to resist at times, although the notion of marrying him might be ridiculous. Joan went to her own room, and Edna lost no time in donning her riding habit. On going downstairs she was joined by Miss Thornhill, who took her arm on the way to the empty dining-room, where they stood watching for the horses.

"What's the matter with you?" asked her aunt.

"The matter?" murmured Edna.

"My dear," Miss Thornhill insisted, "you seemed to undergo a complete revolution last Saturday morning."

"There they are!" cried Edna eagerly, as the

horses were led up to the door, and a few minutes later Franks rode up, dismounting to help Joan and Edna into their saddles. Miss Thornhill stood at a window as they moved off, but Edna did not look back with her usual bright smile. It was an advantage, perhaps, to be left to her own reflections, for Franks seemed to devote himself entirely to Joan. They entered Hyde Park, and turned into the Row, when suddenly Joan exclaimed:

"Edna! There is Mr. Amory!"

After the meeting in Portland Place, and his subsequent interview with Hugo Warbrook, Lambert realised that he should know no peace until he saw Edna Thornhill again.

How would she meet him now that she knew the worst? Would she not feel inclined to go a thousand miles out of her course rather than look upon his face? In the circumstances he could not see his way to go to Grandison Street, thus forcing himself upon her notice. She was, however, as he knew, often to be met with in the Row during her aunt's visit, and, encountered there, she would have the option of either noticing or avoiding him. Lambert was prepared to take the slightest hint that his companionship would henceforth be unpleasant to her.

To ride one of Hugo's horses to-day was out of the question, but there was a livery yard, where he had occasionally hired a mount, and thither he made his way.

He was surprised to see Edna with Joan and Willoughby Franks, with whom he had a nodding acquaintance, instead of with Miss Thornhill, and a glance was enough to prove that she was not in her customary spirits. The question whether she would have ridden on with only a bow was forestalled by Joan, who may have had a purpose of her own to serve.

Coming towards him with her usual assertiveness, she held out a hand.

"Oh!" she exclaimed the next minute, seeing him nod to Franks, "you two know each other already!"

Joan then rode on ahead, leaving Lambert to follow with Edna, whose only greeting had been the faintest shadow of a smile: a chastened, pitiful, appealing smile, it seemed. He could not satisfy himself whether she would have preferred his room to his company and wished that Miss Fletcher had left her to take the initiative. She seemed to have nothing to say, and for some minutes they rode side by side in perfect silence.

"Mr. Amory," she said at last, "I am feeling

desperately anxious—about Oswald. You behold his rival," she added, gazing at Franks, as he kept close to Joan, a few yards ahead.

"His successful rival?" asked Lambert, thankful for a safe topic.

"I am afraid so. Oswald met him at our house yesterday, and wrote me four close pages afterwards. He is coming again this evening to bring matters to a climax."

"If he raves and tears his hair at first," said Lambert, "he will soon get over his disappointment."

"You think men recover from that kind of thing so easily?" she suggested.

"Oh, well, I imagine they vary as much as women," returned Lambert. The expression of her eyes was still piteous, although, keeping them fixed on her horse's ears, she did not give him much chance of looking into them.

"I blame myself for interfering," she continued. "I am afraid I encouraged Oswald rather recklessly. You see," she said, "I believed it was chiefly a question of money with Joan."

"Well, Franks reeks of it," was the answer.

"I cannot forget," exclaimed Edna, "the trouble

I have had to keep Oswald at the bank the last two years."

"You think he may turn it up?"

"Oh, I imagine all manner of things about him. But," she added, "since I met you this morning I have been wondering whether you might not be able to exercise a tranquillising effect. He thinks a great deal of you."

"I should not have suspected it," said Lambert.

Edna actually smiled now as she turned to face him.

"It may appear extraordinary," she admitted, "but still it is a fact. Now, if you were to go to see him——"

"This evening, do you mean?"

"He is certain to be sent away from Grandison Street quite desperate," Edna explained. "He will be in a mood for any—any absurdity."

"Without expecting to do any good," said Lambert, "I will look the fellow up some time to-night." He asked for Oswald's address, being uncertain of the number in Haslemere Street, and promised that nothing should prevent him from going.

"Imagine how wretched he must feel this morning," she cried, and indeed Oswald had never found the bank less interesting, which is saying a great

deal. He could not fix his mind on his work, making one or two careless blunders, which unfortunately came under his uncle's personal notice.

Mr. Sherval was in his fiftieth year; tall, remarkably thin, with a hatchet-shaped face, and grey hair. He spent as many hours in the counting-house as any of his clerks, and had few interests outside its doors. He had, however, felt more gratified than he would have cared to admit to have one of his own family in the bank, and although Oswald might at present show little promise of developing into an ideal manager, having consented to take up the work of an ordinary clerk he had satisfactorily performed it.

"I can't understand what has come over you today," said Mr. Sherval, during the morning, and Oswald looked somewhat sheepish. An unusual bottle of wine at luncheon made him heavy and muddleheaded during the afternoon, but on leaving the bank at five o'clock he partook of two cups of black coffee to clear his brain for the imminent interview at Number seven Grandison Street, where he was joined by Edna Thornhill in the dining-room, and at once began to inveigh against fate.

"But you know, Oswald," she said quietly, "you told me all this in your letter."

"I know," he answered, "but upon my soul, I can't think of anything else. Where is she?" he demanded.

"Upstairs with mother and Aunt Edna."

"Did you tell her I was coming?" asked Oswald.

"Oh dear, yes," said Edna, "but," she added, resting a hand on his sleeve, "I am afraid I have been to blame. I oughtn't to have spoken so hopefully."

"You have always been what you can't help being," he exclaimed, "a rattling good chum! I know I'm a brute to bother you, and upon my word, you look bothered half out of your life."

"Oswald," she said, "I hope you—you won't do anything foolish."

"I don't care how soon I go to the devil," he answered.

"Oh, but that has an unmanly ring!" she said.

"I can't help it," cried Oswald. "I could put up with anything for her, but the life I lead isn't worth living without her—tied to a confounded office stool during the best hours of the day! I would sooner be a sailor before the mast."

"Well," said Edna, with a sigh, "I suppose I must go and send Joan."

Leaving Oswald impatiently pacing the dining-

room floor, she went upstairs, where three pairs of expectant eyes were raised as she entered the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XVIII

EXIT OSWALD

"JOAN," said Edna, "Oswald insists on seeing you."

"No difficulty," was the answer. "He has only to come here."

"He would like you to go to him," Edna persisted.

"Certainly not!" cried Joan, and for ten minutes by the clock on the mantel-shelf Mrs. Thornhill and her sister-in-law now did their utmost to induce Joan to go downstairs and encounter Oswald Sherval. In the end, however, Edna was compelled to return to the dining-room alone.

"It is entirely useless," she explained. "We have all done our best, but you won't see Joan alone today."

"By Jove, I will," he answered, "if I stick here all night!"

"Now," retorted Edna, "you are making yourself ridiculous."

and ashamed, Joan struggled for freedom. Releasing her as suddenly as she had been seized, Oswald left the room, and in the street, a few moments later, stood with a dazed expression on his face, as if uncertain which way to go.

It was seven o'clock when he reached Haslemere Street, and questioned the landlady about a meal. She had not expected him home so early, and having nothing suitable in the house, she received a sovereign, together with instructions to send for a lobster and a bottle of Heidsieck.

He lighted a pipe whilst waiting, and opening the door which led to his bedroom, carried in a large kit-bag and put it on a chair. Passing to and fro several times, he gradually filled the bag, and when at last his dinner was ready, sat down at the round table. Although Oswald had no appetite, he applied himself to the wine, his cheeks becoming steadily more deeply flushed, and at about half-past eight was astonished to see Lambert Amory, who had dined early for the purpose, enter the room.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Oswald, "who the deuce would have thought of seeing you! Edna hasn't lost much time. She sent you to console me, I suppose."

"Thinking of going out of town?" asked Lambert, upon whom the mission scarcely sat easily.

"Why, yes," said Oswald. "I'm turning over a new leaf. For two years I've stuck at that beastly bank; I've pigged along in this hole, lived like a screw, and tried to save money to buy furniture, by Jove! Now I'm going to chuck the lot!"

"You can't leave the bank at a moment's notice," suggested Lambert.

"Well, we shall see. I mean to have it out to-morrow morning. The old chap's been devilish decent to me, and now I'm going to round on him. I can't help it. I simply don't care what I do. Look here, Lambert, I had been fool enough to look at a flat—a snug little crib, just the thing for us—oh, damn!" he cried, and flinging himself into a chair, Oswald rested his arms on the not very clean cloth, hiding his face in them, and blubbering like a child.

Lambert began to feel somewhat at a loss. The office of mentor offered few temptations, whilst yet he wished to do his utmost to please Edna. Resting a hand on Oswald's shoulder, he murmured several commonplaces which he knew must be entirely vain, until at last Sherval sat up, straightened his

back, and looked at Lambert somewhat shamefacedly.

"What in the world," said Amory, "is the good of cutting off your nose to spite your face?"

"Never fear," was the answer. "I sha'n't hurt myself. I mean to have a ripping good time. It's all very well for you to jaw, but wait till you're in the same boat. I'm off to Paris to-morrow night."

He proved as good as his word, taking his uncle's breath away the following morning by announcing his intention.

"It's no use," said Oswald. "I simply can't stick it. I'm immensely sorry—you've been wonderfully decent to me, but upon my soul, I—I can't help it!"

"You are talking like some shallow-brained boy," retorted Mr. Sherval. "If you would like to take your holiday next month instead of in September, I daresay it might be arranged——"

"I can't come back," exclaimed Oswald.

"Certainly not," said Mr. Sherval, controlling his temper with great difficulty, "if you persist in leaving to-day."

"Afraid I've got to," said Oswald.

"Then," cried his uncle, completely losing his temper at last, "you may go, and be hanged!"

Feeling that he was putting himself as deeply in the wrong as he had done at Grandison Street the previous afternoon, Oswald went; and at about the same hour that Tuesday morning Lambert Amory was mounting the horse from the livery yard at his door in Manchester Street, hoping that he might be again fortunate enough to meet Edna in Hyde Park. For an hour or longer he vainly rode to and fro, and then, on the point of giving up his quest, saw her with Willoughby Franks and Miss Fletcher, who came forward to speak to him as before.

Falling back with Edna, Lambert saw that her face still wore the same chastened expression, but if it looked graver than usual he found it no less enticing. In a manner she seemed to make a more intimate appeal to him. He could not help marvelling whether it was reproachfulness which he saw in her eyes when at rare intervals they met his own. More than once it struck him that she had a grievance, as if she were labouring under a sense of injustice.

"Did you see Oswald last night?" she inquired.

"I spent more than an hour with the fellow," was the answer, "but nothing I was able to say

could prevent him from cutting the bank to-day and setting out to Paris to-night."

"To Paris!"

"In Oswald's mind it is the typical gay city," Lambert explained. "He has saved a little money, and he won't be happy until it is spent. Then he will, no doubt, return to London, and—well, live happy ever after."

"I should have liked," murmured Edna, "to say good-bye. You know, Mr. Amory," she added, "it is quite ridiculous to suggest that a man and a woman cannot be the best of friends."

"I sincerely hope so," answered Lambert. "I wonder whether I may come to see Mrs. Thornhill?" he hinted, after a short silence.

"She is difficult to find just now," said Edna, and he saw her face flush, "unless you go to Portland Place."

"There is Miss Thornhill," he persisted.

"No doubt Aunt Edna would be pleased to see you."

"I should like to gratify her," cried Lambert, but Edna quickly changed the subject, and a few minutes later they parted at Hyde Park Corner. The same afternoon he happened to meet Hugo at the club, and walking home together, Warbrook in-

quired whether Amory had by any chance seen Edna since Saturday.

"This morning," answered Lambert, "I saw her in the park."

"Did you speak?"

"Oh, yes——"

"Did she look all right?" asked Hugo.

"Perfectly well," was the answer.

"Cheerful?" demanded Warbrook.

"Not very," said Lambert, and Hugo appeared gratified. "The fact is," Amory explained, "she is bothered about Oswald Sherval, and he dwelt upon that young man's experiences until it became evident that Hugo was not paying the least attention.

"My dear fellow," he exclaimed, taking Lambert's arm, "the more I think of it, the more certain I feel that there's something in the background. I can't tell you exactly why, but the idea has got into my head and I can't get it out."

That evening, in the seclusion of his own room, Lambert felt certain prickings of conscience. Hugo would have been the first to insist that his friend was a man of the most scrupulous honour. No one would more thoroughly respect the unwritten code.

Yet he seemed to be placing himself in an equivocal situation.

He had taken a step which separated Hugo from Edna Thornhill, whilst yet he still indulged himself by seeking her society. He was seeing her behind Hugo's back, seizing every opportunity of thrusting himself in her way, without feeling by any means certain whether she loved Warbrook and would have promised to marry him in the absence of interference.

Still Lambert did not hesitate to make his way to Grandison Street one afternoon, a day or two later, when he rejoiced to hear from the butler that only Edna was at home. He saw, the moment he entered the room, that to receive him there proved a worse ordeal than the meetings out of doors. She rose timorously, and her hand felt cold in his own.

Her face seemed almost to have grown thinner during the last few days, and he disliked to believe that she was half ashamed to encounter him.

"My mother and Aunt Edna," she explained, sitting down again, "have gone to the railway station with Joan."

"Miss Fletcher has returned to Brighton then?" said Lambert.

"She is going to marry Mr. Franks," was the answer. "It was arranged yesterday, and I fancy the engagement served as an excuse to hasten her return."

"Miss Fletcher found you for once a little unsympathetic?" suggested Lambert.

"She must have known I felt immensely sorry for Oswald," said Edna. "I had a letter from him," she continued. "Only a few lines, written just before he left London. I wish he had stayed on at the bank!"

"A bout of dissipation won't do him much harm," returned Lambert.

"Being a man, I suppose not," she cried, then stopped suddenly, averting her eyes and blushing vividly.

Lambert understood that the words had been spoken in forgetfulness of Saturday's conversation in Portland Place, and that the moment they were uttered Edna realised the personal signification that he might put upon them.

"You see," he said, "a man must love his work to do any good at it."

"Do you love yours, Mr. Amory?" she asked impulsively.

"Otherwise I should never have taken it up."

"I think I have heard you are scarcely capable of loving anything," she said, forcing a smile.

"Quite a mistake," he returned lightly, and not for the first time he was reminded that no word of love must, in present circumstances, be spoken by him to her. Having taken means to bring about Hugo's refusal, his own silence was imperative.

"Of course," she continued, "Oswald could never like work of any description. He ought to have been born in the tropics, where he could lie in the sun all day and pick bananas when he felt hungry. I wish Joan had chosen him," she cried. "I believe she has turned her back on the better man."

"Love being proverbially blind," said Lambert, rising from his chair.

"A beneficent arrangement," exclaimed Edna.

"Who," he demanded, "is the pessimist now?"

"Do you imagine love would be possible if it had eyes?" asked Edna.

"Why, yes, I think it might," he answered, holding her hand.

He released it the next instant, however, and taking his hat turned towards the door.

CHAPTER XIX

AN EXPLANATION

IT was on the following Tuesday morning that Lambert Amory experienced his most complete surprise in connection with the affair which absorbed his interest.

On leaving Grandison Street after his last visit, matters seemed to have reached a deadlock, so that it was impossible to imagine what would happen next. Although Hugo Warbrook had been rejected, he had by no means given up all hope. Edna's interview with Lambert that Saturday morning in Portland Place had doubtless made her appear nervous and self-conscious in Hugo's presence, he interpreting her demeanour, rightly enough, as significant of something in the background, which might, it appeared, be the cause of his own disappointment.

Whether or not Edna had refused Hugo in consequence of Lambert's "hint," he could not de-

termine, nor was it easy to see how a more definitive condition of things could be brought about. But on Tuesday morning, Lambert had finished breakfast, corrected the proofs of an article which had arrived by the first post, and made up his mind to walk to his club, when, putting on his hat in the hall, he heard the telephone bell.

"Botheration!" he exclaimed, being in a mood to resent every trivial interruption.

Re-entering his sitting-room, he held the receiver to his ear.

"Hullo!" he said, and the next instant his attention became arrested.

"Is that Mr. Amory?"

"Yes; what is it?"

"I am Miss Thornhill—not my niece," was the answer. "I should like to speak to you face to face."

"Shall I come to Grandison Street?" asked Lambert.

"Not for the world! I am speaking from a call office. Could you meet me at Hertford House?"

"What time?"

"Would twelve to-day suit you?"

"Yes—any time you like."

"Well," said Miss Thornhill, "please wait for

me by Franz Hals' 'Laughing Cavalier'—at twelve o'clock."

"I shall be there," answered Lambert.

"Good-bye for the present, then."

"Good-bye," said Lambert, and having hung up the receiver, he took off his hat, thrusting his hands into his trousers pockets, whilst he stood staring thoughtfully at the carpet.

There seemed to be something mysterious about the appointment. As Mrs. Thornhill was on the telephone, why had he not been spoken to from Number 7 Grandison Street? It appeared obvious that Miss Thornhill did not wish any of her people to suspect that she was in communication with him.

Lambert's mind being full of Edna and her affairs, it was difficult to avoid the inference that they had some connection with the appointment. He determined not to go out until five minutes to twelve, although it proved impossible to settle down to any kind of occupation to make the interval pass less wearily.

Setting forth at last, he entered Hertford House and went at once to the gallery which contained the "Laughing Cavalier," where no one was to be seen but an official and a curate. Lambert looked at his

watch two or three times during the next few minutes, and then, at a little past the hour, he rejoiced to see Miss Thornhill enter the gallery. In spite of his anxious expectancy, he could not help noticing her appearance of distinction as she approached. She was dressed in dark colours this morning, wearing the wide-brimmed black hat, which admirably became her.

"Of course," she exclaimed, taking his hand for an instant, "you have been cudgelling your brains to account for my extraordinary behaviour, but needs must, you know, Mr. Amory, when the——"

"Is he driving very hard?" suggested Lambert.

"I have not come here this morning," she returned, "to fence with you. But naturally you are impatient to hear what really is my motive. Well," she added, colouring slightly, "I have rather reluctantly convinced myself that a duty has to be done—a disagreeable duty. I wish to get it over in as few words as possible."

"Shall I undertake to remain dumb?" he asked.

"That would scarcely be satisfactory, because I must begin by asking a question."

"Then I will remember that brevity is the soul of wit," said Lambert.

"I fancy that man in livery has his eyes on us," murmured Miss Thornhill.

She glanced at the official and afterwards at the curate's back, almost timorously, and now that Lambert stood facing her, he saw that she was less self-possessed than he had always seen her before.

"Can't you pretend to be interested in the pictures?" she suggested. "Let us admire Perdita," she added, walking towards the Gainsboroughs on the opposite wall. "Of course," said Miss Thornhill, with her eyes on Lambert's face, "you know that Sir Hugo asked my niece to marry him?"

"Warbrook told me she had refused him."

"Was it," Miss Thornhill demanded, "on account of any threat you held over her? Believing you knew something which she would not like to reach Sir Hugo's ears, did you insist that he must be told if she accepted him?"

Lambert now found it difficult to maintain that self-control on which he was disposed to pride himself. He felt that the case was on the point of being reopened, but even amidst his impatience for some fresh and perhaps epoch-making information, he could not suppress a desire to excuse his own conduct.

"I did not—I could not threaten Miss Thorn-

hill," he answered. "But a—a certain episode having come to my knowledge, I thought Warbrook ought to hear of it. When I tried to tell him the words stuck in my throat. I ventured to approach Miss Thornhill——"

"Feeling satisfied she would marry Sir Hugo if you did not interfere?"

"Obviously, I considered it possible," Lambert admitted.

"Anyhow," said Miss Thornhill, "Edna has been miserable ever since. You cannot imagine any girl more disastrously changed. She does not smile from morning until night, and I cannot stand by whilst her life is being spoiled. Mr. Amory," she continued, "I have never been able to forget that you were Alfred Chichester's executor, although I could not make up my mind how much you knew, or whether even you knew anything, until last Saturday week."

"The day Warbrook asked her to marry him?" suggested Lambert.

"And the day she met you in Portland Place," said Miss Thornhill. "Anyone who had seen her and Sir Hugo the previous evening must have guessed it. You thrust yourself in her way the following morning and drove the sunshine out of her

life. Then I put this and that together," Miss Thornhill added, "although hitherto I had tried to believe that Mr. Chichester had destroyed those letters, as he ought to have done."

"It was," said Lambert, "my unpleasant lot to read them."

"All?" she demanded. "Did you read them all?"

"An hour or so after Warbrook had been singing Miss Thornhill's praises," answered Lambert, "and the same night they were burned. I was at my wits' end," he explained. "In the emergency I don't pretend to have acted with all the wisdom in the world——"

"Oh," she admitted, "I can understand it was an embarrassing situation, but you have a worse, I am afraid, before you, Mr. Amory," Miss Thornhill added. "I have not a doubt that Edna would have promised to marry Sir Hugo if you had refrained from interference."

"If Warbrook had known, he would have been the last man to dream of marrying her!" said Lambert.

"Surely," was the rather impatient answer, "you can see to what I have been leading?"

"I confess I cannot," exclaimed Lambert.

"There was nothing to know!"

He took a step backwards, catching his breath.

"Nothing to know!" he muttered.

"You imagined that—that Edna was not fit to be Sir Hugo's wife," said Miss Thornhill.

"That he would think so," returned Amory.

"She is fit to be the wife of any man," Miss Thornhill hastily continued. "She is absolutely without spot or blemish."

Seeing that he was unable to master his feelings at the moment, Miss Thornhill walked to the next picture, the portrait of Miss Haverfield, gazing at the canvas as if it alone occupied her attention.

"There is one thing I don't quite understand," he said, coming to her side again.

"Well?"

"As Miss Thornhill had nothing to fear, why did she pay the least heed to what I said?"

"You must really," was the answer, "excuse my entering into unnecessary details. I leave you to draw your own conclusions. But try to remember the essential fact: I know of my own knowledge that your intervention was absolutely and entirely unnecessary."

Lambert stood by Miss Thornhill's side with his arms akimbo, holding his walking-stick in his right

hand. His dark eyebrows were slightly raised, his lips pursed as if he were trying to solve some abstruse problem.

"But if she had nothing to be afraid of——" he was continuing, when Miss Thornhill impatiently interrupted him.

"Oh, what a persistent man you are!" she said. "Can't you understand——"

"Why, no," he admitted. "Because she might have gone her own way regardless of anything I said. If she had nothing to fear——"

"Well, then, perhaps she had something—in a way," cried Miss Thornhill, and now Lambert's eyes shone as they looked into hers.

He experienced a sense of intense exhilaration on account of his own egregious blunder. From the outset, from the night when he examined Chichester's papers, he had done Edna a deplorable injustice! He knew at last that her honour was unsullied—knew it, surely, on the highest authority!

She had, indeed, acted with extraordinary self-abnegation. It seemed no longer possible to question Miss Thornhill's meaning. Edna had allowed herself to be suspected, rather than proffer an explanation which must implicate the aunt, for whom, Lambert knew, she entertained the deepest affection.

Still, even in the first flush of the revelation, the act appeared a little extravagant. It was not the kind of blame which a woman would willingly take upon herself. By some means, at present unexplained, she must have known of Miss Thornhill's intrigue with Chichester from the beginning, but she had tried to "pump" Lambert for her aunt's sake instead of for her own.

Naturally, she would have found any attempt at an explanation terribly embarrassing, yet a word would have sufficed, whereas she was not usually a stickler for conventionality. Her self-sacrifice had been carried to a pitch which he would have thought inhumanly extreme, in reviewing a novel. He would certainly have said the incident was untrue to life.

It may be that he was too apt to reduce persons to one commonplace level—not that he could ever think Edna commonplace.

"Now," he said quietly, "I begin to understand."

"That being the case," answered Miss Thornhill, with a sigh of relief, "you must admit your course is clear."

"Upon my word," he cried, "nothing seems very clear but the one fact——"

"You prevented Edna from accepting Sir

Hugo," she insisted, "and you must undo the mischief. There are not two ways to set about it. Sir Hugo must hear the whole story, and you must tell him."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Lambert.

"An unpleasant task, no doubt," said Miss Thornhill, "but you must see it is not to be avoided."

"It would have been simpler," suggested Lambert, "for you to have told him instead of coming to me."

"Thank you!" she exclaimed. "I preferred in such a matter to deal with a man of the world. Sir Hugo can never be that. You have done the mischief, and it is for you to undo it."

"Then Edna—Miss Thornhill doesn't know you have met me this morning?" asked Lambert.

"She has not the remotest suspicion," was the answer. "No doubt she will have to know. I imagine there is little question that when Sir Hugo learns her reason for refusing him he will come forward again."

"None whatever," Lambert was forced to admit.

"Well," she said, offering her hand as a signal

of dismissal, "the sooner you get to work the better."

He raised his hat and left her there, although she also set forth homewards as soon as Lambert had had a sufficient start. Miss Thornhill felt thankful she had finished her distasteful duty, and quite willing to pass several years without seeing Mr. Amory again.

CHAPTER XX

A SURPRISE FOR HUGO

IT was entirely vain for Lambert to attempt to persuade himself that Miss Thornhill had not right on her side. Granting, as she insisted, that Edna loved Hugo Warbrook, it seemed certain that she had been prevented from accepting him by what occurred in Portland Place the morning after the visit to the theatre.

Lambert was, perhaps, too little of an idealist to understand how she could bring herself to refuse the man she loved rather than enter on the necessary explanation. It would, no doubt, have proved difficult and embarrassing to tell Hugo that Miss Thornhill had entered into an intrigue of which Mr. Amory suspected her niece, but it could not have been impossible.

Edna must either love Miss Thornhill very much or Hugo very little. Still, it seemed to remain for Lambert to accept the facts as he had understood

Miss Thornhill to explain them, and, according to that explanation, Edna, at least, was immaculate.

He could not go to Grandison Street, confess his error, and explain that now she had his gracious permission to marry Hugo Warbrook if she pleased; whereas the only alternative was to set out to Bryanston Square and make a clean breast of everything. On the whole, Lambert came to the conclusion he would sooner seek any other spot on the face of the earth.

After a hasty luncheon, however, he put on his hat, and, reaching the house, felt relieved to hear that Sir Hugo was not at home. He had lunched out, and was not expected back until dinner time, having ordered that meal at seven, with the intention of going afterwards to the House of Commons.

"Tell Sir Hugo," said Lambert to the butler, "that I shall come at a quarter to eight. I wish to see him on important business, and shall be glad if he can wait."

The message had the effect of spoiling Hugo's usually robust appetite. A dozen times he asked himself what could be the nature of Lambert's "important business," if it did not concern Edna Thornhill. Rising from the table at half-past seven, Hugo went to the smoking-room, where he waited impa-

tiently for Amory's arrival. A few minutes after the appointed time the bell rang, and Lambert entered, with a face which, as usual, afforded little clue to his emotions.

"Sorry I was out this afternoon," said Hugo, gripping his hand. "I have had a rather busy time —have a cigarette," he added, pushing the tin box along the table.

"I won't smoke," was the answer.

"Sit down, then," urged Hugo. "Afraid I mustn't give you more than half an hour. I ought to go to Lady Appleton's dance to-night, only, you understand, I have done with that sort of thing."

"The fact is," said Lambert, still standing, with his hands clasped behind him, "I have something to tell you——"

"About Edna?" cried Hugo irrepressibly.

"Ye-es."

"Then get it out at once, for goodness' sake!"

Lambert looked at a chair, as if doubting whether to sit down or not, but finally rested a foot on its seat. Hugo flung himself on to a sofa, with his hands in his pockets, trying to control his increasing excitement.

"You remember," said Lambert, far too slowly,

as it seemed, "coming to my place that Friday after the theatre, when I told you——"

"About some wretched woman who knew Chichester!"

"You haven't forgotten the details?" suggested Lambert.

"What on earth has all this to do with Edna?" demanded Hugo.

Lambert moistened his lips and passed his right hand slowly across his forehead.

"At the time," he said, "I believed it had a great deal to do with her."

"With Edna!" exclaimed Hugo, sitting suddenly erect.

"I thought so at the time," said Lambert, and as his meaning dawned on Warbrook he rose impulsively to his legs.

"You must have been stark, staring mad!" he retorted. "You told me there was a disreputable intrigue! How could anything of that kind be associated with Edna?"

"Anyhow," continued Lambert, "that was my opinion—I think it would have been the opinion of any man in the same circumstances."

"It wouldn't have been mine, for one!" cried Hugo wrathfully, as he sat down again.

"You see," said Lambert, with a self-possessed manner which belied his feelings, "I came across the letters amongst Chichester's papers. They were signed with Miss Thornhill's Christian name, written on Grandison Street notepaper—some of them, at least."

"Then who wrote them?" demanded Hugo.

"At the time, as I have told you, I had no doubt. I knew of only one Edna at Grandison Street, though subsequently I was introduced to Miss Thornhill of Paulhampton, and to Miss Fletcher. Then it became necessary to decide amongst the three."

"And you hit on the most utterly impossible!" exclaimed Hugo.

"Still," urged Lambert, "I should like you to try to realise my position. I was convinced that Edna Thornhill had entered into that intrigue with Chichester——"

"Good heavens!" cried Hugo, half rising, but dropping back again to the sofa.

"I knew you were going to ask her to marry you within a few hours, and that you certainly would not do anything of the kind if you heard the truth."

"It was not the truth!" thundered Hugo.

"What I believed to be the truth," Lambert corrected himself. It was difficult to keep things clear in his mind. "I tried to persuade myself it was not necessary to tell you—that you might be mistaken in thinking Edna would accept you."

"But now," exclaimed Hugo rapturously, "you know she would?"

"For God's sake!" said Lambert, with a great deal of half-suppressed emotion, "let me get to the end!"

"You know she would have accepted me?" cried Hugo, on his feet again.

"I did my best to tell you that night after the theatre," continued Lambert, disregarding the urgent question. "I could not get out the words. I determined to speak to her personally."

"You never had the audacity to accuse her to her face!" shouted Hugo.

"I met her on Saturday morning," said Lambert, apparently quite self-possessed again, "and I dealt in hints and innuendos as I had done to you overnight, suggesting that no man ought to be allowed to become engaged to her without a full confession. She seemed to understand—to agree. She assured me there was nothing to fear, and I knew she might be trusted."

"Then that," exclaimed Hugo, leaning towards Lambert, with his clenched fists resting on the table, "that was why she refused me!"

"Quite possibly——"

"But why?" demanded Hugo, with a bewildered expression. Lambert had foreseen that the question was inevitable. The difficulty had occurred to himself at Hertford House, as it must naturally occur to anyone. "If she had never had anything to do with Chichester—as, of course, she had not—how was it she even understood what you were driving at with your hints and innuendos?" Hugo added contemptuously. "If she was innocent, as any man in his senses must have known, why did she refuse me? What had she to fear?"

"Nothing for herself. But her aunt made an appointment with me this morning——"

"Miss Thornhill!" muttered Hugo. "Do you mean," he demanded, "that Edna allowed herself to remain under suspicion rather than expose her aunt?"

"That appears to be the fact," said Lambert, "improbable as it sounds."

"Improbable!" cried Warbrook, with intense enthusiasm. "Oh, my dear fellow, can't you show a

spark of generosity for once? Why should you try to belittle a noble action?"

"Still," said Lambert, "if a woman loves a man——"

"That," Hugo insisted, "is where you make such a mistake. 'I could not love thee half so much, loved I not honour more.' We are not all mere slaves to our feelings, however deep they may be. I declare to you," he said, "I rejoice that, loving me, as you can't help admitting now that Edna does, she could yet deny herself out of generosity."

Lambert shrugged his shoulders, and stretching forth his hand took a cigarette from the box on the table.

"Why," asked Hugo, as Amory struck a match, "did Miss Thornhill think it necessary to tell you all this?"

"Her explanation was that she could not bear to see Edna miserable."

"Because of me!" said Warbrook in an awe-struck voice. "Miserable because of me! By Jove!" he added.

"Well, now," was the answer, "you know all about it. What are you going to do?"

At this question Hugo's face grew thoughtful.

"The difficulty is," he muttered, "to make her understand why I am bothering her again."

"You can put all the blame on to me," said Lambert. "And recollect that the barest hint will suffice."

"Anyhow," answered Hugo, "I was right when I told you there must be something in the background. I know what I might do," he continued, with increasing excitement. "She is pretty certain to be at Lady Appleton's dance to-night. Why shouldn't I go?"

"Then if I clear out," suggested Lambert, "you can begin to change."

He had dined in a frock coat, intending to go to the House of Commons afterwards, but in the light of Lambert's revelation nothing must be allowed to stand in the way of the earliest possible understanding with Edna. He shook hands perfunctorily with Amory, unable completely to forgive the indignity to which she had been subjected in consequence of that inconceivable suspicion.

Lambert, for his part, walked back to Manchester Street in a sober mood. There was one consolation at least, besides the glory of Edna's impeccability. No more possibility of misunderstanding! On the present occasion Edna would have a

free hand. She could accept Sir Hugo Warbrook or refuse him, as she pleased. If she accepted him, well, one must grin and bear it; but if, on the other hand, she still persisted in her refusal, hopes might arise which at present threatened to lead only to madness.

CHAPTER XXI

A SECOND ATTEMPT

MISS THORNHILL, since parting from Lambert Amory that morning, had been able to think of little besides the consequences of the interview at Hertford House. That he would sooner or later enlighten Sir Hugo she felt certain, whereas she was inclined to believe that he was scarcely the man to allow the grass to grow under his feet.

How would Sir Hugo act?

Mrs. Thornhill, being anxious to spend the evening with Mrs. Robbins, had asked her sister-in-law to act as Edna's chaperon, and Miss Thornhill had consented, although her niece had suggested that the best way to get over the difficulty would be to stay at home.

"I have never felt less inclined to dance," she insisted.

Miss Thornhill now began to wonder whether Sir Hugo would put in an appearance at Lady Appleton's. She hoped that, having heard Mr. Amory's explanation, he would seize the earliest opportunity of setting matters on a proper footing, as indeed he intended to do. The question in Miss Thornhill's mind was whether Edna ought to be warned of what might lie in store for her or not? After due consideration, she thought not.

Undoubtedly Edna would be required to pass through something of an ordeal, but the suggestion of it might create such an emotional disturbance that Mrs. Thornhill would become suspicious, and ask extremely inconvenient questions. Also, Miss Thornhill feared lest a hint at what might occur at Lady Appleton's should turn the scale and keep her niece at home.

In the carriage, however, Miss Thornhill could not refrain from inquiring whether Edna expected to meet Sir Hugo this evening.

"Oh, I don't know," said Edna. "Do you think he is likely to be there?"

"I suppose," was the answer, "he would scarcely ever go to a dance if it were not for the sake of seeing you. He must regard himself as holding a candle to the devil, you know."

Soon after entering the large ball-room, Edna began to waltz. She knew most of the men, and was an especial favourite of her hostess. Miss Thornhill, at the side of the room farther from the door, began to wish for someone to talk to. The carriage had been ordered for half-past two, and there remained about four hours to be disposed of, when she saw Sir Hugo in the act of shaking hands with Lady Appleton, after which he walked a few yards away and stood leaning against the wall, gazing at the passing couples, obviously on the lookout for somebody.

Miss Thornhill trusted that he would not come to speak to her. Admirable man though he was, Sir Hugo certainly lacked finesse. But she had really no necessity to feel apprehensive. He was appalled at the prospect of opening the distressing subject, even to Edna, and was not in the least likely to mention it to anyone else—especially to Miss Thornhill.

He experienced a sense of deep embarrassment merely on meeting her eyes across the room. Whilst she was telling herself it was to be regretted that he did not try to hold his long figure a little more erect, Sir Hugo marvelled that a woman whom he had always respected—a neighbour of his own at

Paulhampton—could at the mature age of thirty-five have proved capable of such a lapse as that of which he firmly believed Miss Thornhill to be guilty.

He took care to avoid her side of the room whilst he waited impatiently for Edna to come to a standstill, and when at last she stopped close to the door he went towards her with his heart thumping against his ribs, wondering how Lambert Amory could by any possibility have made such a disastrous blunder. Surely, no other woman in the room had Edna's appearance of unsullied purity and innocence! Never had she seemed more delectable in his eyes, never had he felt so confident of possessing her! He knew why she had refused to become his wife, and extolled her on that account. She was dressed in white silk, with three rows of pearls fastened tightly around her neck, and pale pink roses at her breast.

Nor could anything have been more gracious than her greeting as Hugo stepped forward, ignoring her partner, who soon walked off. The wistfully grave expression which had been noticeable whilst she waltzed could now easily be accounted for, and when Hugo, in fact, explained it by the regret she experienced in consequence of his rejec-

tion, he could almost have fallen down and worshipped her in the face of the assembled company.

"I suppose," he said, "you didn't expect to see me here this evening?"

"Why not?" she asked, whilst he became conscious of the same kind of embarrassment in her demeanour which had previously made him suspect the existence of something in the background.

"The fact is," he continued, "I could think of no better way of getting a few words with you."

"Surely it was possible to come to Grandison Street?" she suggested.

"You see," he returned, "I felt certain you would be here to-night, and, upon my word, I could not wait until to-morrow."

When she looked up with a half-startled expression in her eyes he reminded himself that she could have no suspicion of what had passed during his recent interview with Amory. Edna, very likely, thought that Hugo was merely about to ask her again to marry him, whereas she would feel compelled once more to endure the pain of a refusal.

"May I take you somewhere out of the crowd?" he suggested, and resting a hand on his arm, she suffered him to lead her into a large, illuminated conservatory, built out over a garden behind the

house. Although it had several occupants, Sir Hugo found a secluded seat for Edna by the side of a tall palm growing in a majolica pot.

Sitting down at her side, with his feet drawn back under the bench, he leaned forward to meet her eyes.

"I have been having a long talk with Amory this evening," he began, Edna drawing as far away as the limits of the seat permitted. Her face wore a suddenly startled expression, although she succeeded in controlling her voice.

"Not a very unusual experience," she murmured.

"The subject was certainly unusual."

"Oh, yes," said Edna, "that is the best of Mr. Amory. He never seems quite commonplace."

"He has been making a—well," cried Hugo, "a kind of confession."

He had never seen any woman more *distraite*. By this time Edna must suspect what was coming, but although Hugo understood that he should inflict a certain amount of pain, he flattered himself that this would soon be overwhelmed by pleasure. Her purpose, as he understood it, was to keep Miss Thornhill's secret inviolable, but she would soon realise that it was as safe in his keeping as in hers. Although she had rejected him rather than betray

her aunt, she could scarcely fail to rejoice on hearing that he shared her knowledge; that there existed no longer the slightest obstacle to their common happiness. Nevertheless, he could not doubt that at the present moment Edna's sensations were entirely painful.

"Now," she said, with admirable courage, "I should not have imagined Mr. Amory was given to that kind of thing."

"A confession with which you were concerned," answered Hugo, in a whisper. "No man could have been more regretful."

"At least," she faltered, "he would not betray his —his regret!"

"Edna!" cried Hugo, stooping until he ran the risk of falling off his seat, "you must forgive me for daring to hint at anything so abominable——"

"Why such strong language?" she demanded.

"But," he continued, "you understand that I— I know all about those letters which Amory found amongst Alfred Chichester's papers."

She was leaning on one side towards the palm, as if she wished to hide her face behind its spreading leaves.

"Amory told me only an hour or so ago," said

Hugo. "I have not lost a moment in coming to you."

"How—how extremely energetic," she answered, but he noticed the quaver in her voice.

"He repeated the whole of the wretched story," urged Hugo, "so that at last I understand——"

"What?" she murmured. "What do you understand?"

"Even when you sent me away that day," he insisted, "I felt confident there must be something in the background. I hinted as much, you remember. Your manner betrayed you. But now I understand why you thought yourself compelled to throw cold water over me. It is odious to have to hint at the thing," he continued. "I feel ashamed that you should hear——"

"Sir Hugo," said Edna, suddenly sitting more upright, "need I hear another word?"

"Bear with me a few minutes longer," he entreated. "I suppose those letters somehow came to your knowledge. You cannot have read them——"

For a moment she seemed to hesitate, but then turned her head, gazing into his eyes.

"Yes, I—I have read them," she faltered.

Hugo's face showed his astonishment. He could not imagine how the correspondence, which pre-

sumably had lain in Chichester's drawers either at his house near Fitzjohn's Avenue, or at the theatre, could have come under Edna's eyes.

"Then I may take it," he said, "that you know the nature of their contents?"

"Ye-es," she answered, with a shudder.

"Amory," continued Hugo, and the statement cost him a pang, "was mad enough to believe you wrote them—oh, forgive me!" he added, as the colour faded from her face. "He has told me that he led you to understand that if—if you accepted the proposal he knew I intended to make, he should speak out. You had reasons for not wishing him to speak, consequently you had the glorious generosity to send me away. But now Amory has discovered his atrocious mistake——"

Now there could be no question about her astonishment. Her interest had been obvious from the first, but at these words it quickened into irrepressible excitement.

"His mistake!" she murmured. "His mistake!"

"He sees how idiotic it was to suspect you."

"What—what has led him to—to see that?" she demanded.

"You understand he had an appointment with Miss Thornhill this morning——"

"Mr. Amory had?"

"He met her at Hertford House. There she seems to have made a clean breast of everything," said Hugo.

He felt afraid that Edna was going to swoon. As she sat upright by his side, one hand tightly gripping her fan, her body seemed to sway. Hugo put forth an arm as if for her support, deprecating her condition, because other guests of Lady Appleton's were continually passing in and out of the conservatory. Through the draped doorway came the sound of music from the band.

But Edna made an effort to recover self-control, and after a short silence began to question him almost in her ordinary voice.

"Sir Hugo," she said, "I should like to hear precisely what my aunt told Mr. Amory."

"Oh, well," he muttered, as though desirous to avoid the explanation.

"I wish to hear," Edna insisted.

"Upon my word," he said, "I scarcely know how to tell you. Amory had assumed that you wrote those letters, but Miss Thornhill explained that you —forgive me, Edna—that you were fit to be any man's wife."

"Well?" she demanded, drawing in her breath, and speaking in little above a whisper.

"I had never for an instant doubted it," he urged. "If Amory had told me earlier, I should have cast the lie in his teeth!"

"Sir Hugo," she answered, "it would not have been a lie!"

"The foulest aspersion the mind of man can conceive!" he insisted warmly.

"It is true," she said, "that I—that I wrote the letters to Mr. Chichester!"

Her demeanour had entirely changed. In different circumstances Hugo might have thought that after a long prevarication she had at last determined to speak the truth and brave the consequences. Her tone now suggested that she did not very much care what they might be.

But Hugo had his own explanation. Even yet she was prepared to dissemble in order to shield her aunt's reputation.

"Edna," he urged, "it is impossible! inconceivable! I understand your motive. You are still trying to play your part, but the difference is that we are going to play it together in the future. I want you to promise to be my wife," he pleaded.

"If you will not believe me, what can I do?" she said, throwing out her hands helplessly.

"I believe," he persisted, "that you are the best and purest woman in the world!"

"I wrote those letters," she insisted.

"You are English to the backbone," he exclaimed. "You do not know when you are beaten."

"Oh," she murmured, rising impetuously, "I cannot endure any more. Please take me back——"

"Not until you have told me what I am longing to hear!"

"Take me back!" she entreated, resting a hand on his arm. "I—I am afraid of making myself ridiculous."

Still he did not budge, so that they stood together close to the tall palm, Edna's face as white as her frock, Hugo's crimson with excitement, as he leaned forward eagerly awaiting her answer.

"I am not playing a part," she said quietly. "You are keeping me on the rack. Why will you not believe me? I have told you the absolute truth!"

His right arm had dropped limp to his side, but still she held it. As he now looked into her eyes the truth of her assurance came home to him, and he could have groaned aloud. Curving his arm again, and bowing his neck, without a word he led

her back to the ball-room, piloting her round its side, amongst the dancers, to Miss Thornhill. A couple cannoned against him so that he was separated from Edna, who stepped swiftly forward alone, sinking into a seat next to her aunt's.

With his head in a whirl, scarcely knowing how he made his way towards the door, Hugo was intercepted by Lady Appleton.

"Sir Hugo!" she cried brightly, "now can't I persuade you to dance for once?"

"Really," he stammered, "I am afraid——"

"Men are becoming hopeless," she answered. "But you are surely not going?"

"Upon my word, I am afraid I must," he said.

"Thank you so much for coming at all," she cried, and the next instant Hugo was on the staircase.

CHAPTER XXII

ADMISSIONS

HUGO WARBROOK lost no time in putting on his overcoat and getting into the street, where, looking at his watch, he saw that it still wanted a few minutes to midnight. Hailing a hansom which had just set down a belated guest, he directed the driver to Manchester Street, on the chance of finding Lambert still up.

Hugo was a man who invariably found it difficult to consume his own smoke, whereas he felt almost more indignant with Amory than when he had listened to his confession a few hours earlier. Hitherto, Hugo had regarded Lambert as a man who seldom made a mistake. Now, however, he seemed to be egregiously blundering. As, however, Hugo was driven towards Manchester Street, he realised that, after all, Lambert's first impression had been correct.

But Amory must have lamentably misunderstood Miss Thornhill that morning—unless, indeed, Edna's aunt had been playing a deep and entirely inexcusable game.

On getting out of the hansom Hugo at first thought that the house was in darkness, but having paid the cabman, thinking he would walk the short distance to Bryanston Square, Hugo rejoiced to see that there was still a light in Lambert's sitting-room, and at the risk of disturbing the other members of the household, he pressed the bell-button.

At that moment, Lambert was leaning back in a chair, with his feet on the fender, and a pipe between his teeth. As a rule, he smoked cigarettes in these days, but his emotions this evening seemed to necessitate a pipe. His imagination had followed Sir Hugo to Lady Appleton's house. What would Warbrook say to Edna, and—more important still—what would she say in return to him?

Lambert had scarcely attempted to read this evening, although there was a parcel of books awaiting notice. Hearing the bell, he rose abruptly to his feet, wondering whether the late visitor could conceivably be Hugo. Opening the door, Lambert saw that the hall was dark, and remembered that Diggle had bidden him "good-night" an hour ago.

Going to the mat, Lambert drew back the bolts and let down the chain.

If Hugo was waiting outside, what might not his visit portend? Success, surely, would have chained him to Edna's side for the remainder of the evening. But perhaps she had not gone to the dance, and consequently Hugo had come away in disgust.

Warbrook made no effort, as Amory would undoubtedly have done, to disguise his chagrin.

"Afraid I'm rather late," he muttered.

"Not a bit of it," said Lambert, staying behind to close the door whilst Hugo entered the sitting-room. In the light his face looked ghastly. "Whiskey?" suggested Amory.

"Thanks," was the answer.

"Help yourself," urged Lambert, nodding towards the spirit-stand and the syphon which Diggle had, as usual, placed on the table. Hugo mixed a stiffer glass than he was accustomed to, and having drunk it at a draught, sat down in silence. "Didn't you find Miss Thornhill at Lady Appleton's?" asked Lambert.

"Oh yes," cried Hugo, with a world of significance in his voice, "she was there."

"Then how is it you are here?"

"Good heaven!" said Hugo emphatically, "what a dreadful blunder you made!"

"How is that?" demanded Lambert.

"You misunderstood her aunt from first to last."

"There could be no possibility of misunderstanding one thing," said Lambert.

"A nice position you put me in!" exclaimed Hugo. "I went to Lady Appleton's, took Edna to the conservatory, asked her to be my wife——"

"Well?" urged Lambert, as Warbrook paused.

"Fortunately, she was, at the least, candid—I admit that," said Hugo. "At first I couldn't believe her. I had the idea she was still keeping up the same game—the game you told me she had been playing to shield Miss Thornhill."

Hugo was too fully occupied by his own disillusioning to pay much attention to Lambert, who stood with his hands in his trousers pockets, gazing down into the other's face, more highly wrought, perhaps, than he had ever been in his life.

"What did you find so difficult?" he asked.

"Her own assertion—that she had written those letters, after all!"

"Did Edna say that?"

"Repeated it two or three times. You see, I

couldn't take it in. You may imagine that, as I kept on begging for her promise to be my wife."

"She succeeded in convincing you at last, anyhow?" suggested Lambert.

"Yes," said Hugo, resting his elbows on his knees and his head on his hands. "She convinced me at last."

It came upon Lambert with scarcely less crushing force than it had an hour ago come upon Warbrook. It was true that he had believed that Edna had participated in the intrigue, before he began what was practically a fresh acquaintance with her on the evening of Mrs. Thwaites' dance. It was true that in spite of this belief he had formed the very highest opinion of her. But since the interview with Miss Thornhill he could assure himself that her past experiences had been as desirable as she appeared at present; and now it proved detestable to be forced back to his former standpoint. It was impossible to avoid a feeling of intense disappointment, which, however, he strove to dissemble.

"Well," he said, "what if to a certain degree I did misunderstand Miss Thornhill?"

"To a certain degree!" exclaimed Hugo contemptuously.

"As Edna has admitted the letters, no doubt she wrote them——"

"It's enough," Hugo interrupted, "to make a man doubt whether virtue or truth any longer exist in the world."

"But," continued Lambert calmly, "although she was responsible for her share of the correspondence——"

"Quite enough, according to your description, goodness knows!" cried Hugo.

"Oh, yes, a—a regrettable incident, no doubt," returned Lambert, taking his pipe from his lips and gazing into the bowl, "a childish blunder—absurd to imagine it can be allowed to spoil a woman's life."

"But the girl who could write them—to conceive Edna's writing them!"

"Anyhow, their real significance was that they pointed to an assignation—which we know was not kept."

"How do we know that?" demanded Hugo.

"Miss Thornhill's statement so far was unequivocal."

"My dear fellow," cried Hugo, "how can you be so blind? To me it's as clear as anything can possibly be. Miss Thornhill meant well, no doubt,

but she was simply trying to put you—and me, through you—on a false scent."

"You have found one anyhow," said Lambert. "But I shall clear the affair up," he added composedly.

"What are you going to do?"

"Write to Miss Thornhill—ask her to meet me again at the same place to-morrow morning, say at eleven. She must give me a more complete explanation. You might post the letter, if you don't mind," he added.

As he spoke he crossed the room and sat down at the writing-table which stood between the two windows, Hugo lighting a cigarette as Lambert took a pen. Amory's actions seemed very deliberate, and he did not hesitate for a moment as to what he should say. In as few words as possible he asked Miss Thornhill once more to meet him by the "Laughing Cavalier," nor did he feel any doubt about her compliance. She would, in all probability, have heard something of what had passed at Lady Appleton's, and recognise the desirability of a further conversation on the subject.

"I should like," said Hugo, rising as Lambert addressed the envelope, "to know what happens."

"If you are here between a quarter and half-past

eleven to-morrow morning, you shall," was the answer.

Having given Hugo the letter, Lambert accompanied him to the hall, and when he had walked away shot the bolts and put up the chain. Then returning to his sitting-room, he began to pace the floor, wondering what was happening to Edna, who, as a matter of fact, had not moved from her aunt's side after Hugo's hurried departure.

Miss Thornhill did not require to be told that something had gone lamentably wrong; Edna's face was enough! She refused to dance again, pleading a headache, no doubt with perfect sincerity. Both she and Miss Thornhill felt thankful when it was half-past two, the time at which the carriage had been ordered. No sooner had Edna taken her seat and put up the window as the horse started, than she turned towards her aunt.

"Oh, why," she cried, with a sob in her voice, "did you break your word? You promised never to utter a syllable—even to me!"

"My dear child," said Miss Thornhill, "I am too old, and, I hope, too wise, to make myself a slave to a vow. How miserable you have looked ever since you met Mr. Amory on Saturday week!"

"I wish I had not told you," murmured Edna.

"It was impossible," Miss Thornhill continued, "to feel satisfied that he had not made some unpleasant reference; that he was not the cause of Sir Hugo's refusal. Too absurd to allow you to eat your heart out, when a word in season might set everything right."

"Nothing in the world can do that," said Edna with a deeply drawn sigh.

"Why exaggerate?" demanded Miss Thornhill. "Of course it was all very deplorable; your escape was terribly narrow——"

"Due to no merit of my own," answered Edna, with her face hidden in her hands.

"Oh, well, for that matter," said her aunt, leaning back in her corner of the carriage, "how much of our best fortune is due to our own virtues? Still, we must take the good the gods provide. My idea was that if Sir Hugo came forward again with complete knowledge——"

"But he didn't!" cried Edna, uncovering her face.

"Then didn't he repeat himself this evening?"

"Ye-es," faltered Edna.

"Have you also been going in for repetition?" Miss Thornhill demanded.

"Aunt Edna," was the answer, "what was it you told Mr. Amory?"

"Simply that you—well, that you were perfectly fit to be any man's wife, forsooth! It is true I avoided the unpleasantness of entering into unnecessary details."

"How I wish you had!" murmured Edna.

"Why?"

"You would have spared me the ignominy of a shameful admission. Sir Hugo insisted that Mr. Amory had been mistaken in imagining the letters were mine——"

"Then who, did he suppose, wrote them?" asked Miss Thornhill.

"You——"

"How could he dare!" she exclaimed, sitting bolt upright. Then, aware that her niece was violently shuddering, she added, "Mr. Amory is more stupid than I should have believed."

"Can you picture the situation in the conservatory?" said Edna. "Sir Hugo protesting that it was inconceivable I could have written the letters, imploring me to marry him; I, driven into a corner, compelled to assure him again and again of the truth. He was terribly taken aback when at last he couldn't doubt any longer."

"Good gracious!" cried Miss Thornhill, "it is little wonder. What a hopeless muddle the man's mind must have been in! First, Mr. Amory assuring him you didn't write them, then hearing from your own lips that you did."

"I wonder——" said Edna, and then she suddenly stopped.

"What do you wonder?"

"Whether—whether Sir Hugo has seen Mr. Amory since——"

"My dear," suggested her aunt, "you seem greatly concerned about Mr. Amory's opinion."

"Don't you think any woman would value it?" returned Edna. "Oh," she broke out, "to imagine his reading those hateful letters. Aunt Edna, how could I have written them! How could I!"

As she ceased speaking the carriage turned the corner of Grandison Street, and a few moments later the horse stopped at the door of Number 7.

CHAPTER XXIII

MISS THORNHILL KEEPS THE APPOINTMENT

"GOOD-MORNING, Edna," said Mrs. Thornhill, as her daughter entered the dining-room. "I heard you return last night," she added, as Edna kissed her forehead. "Did you enjoy the dance? I can't say you look any the better for it."

As she was speaking, Miss Thornhill came in, and Mrs. Thornhill's attention was at once diverted.

"A letter for you," she exclaimed; "at least I suppose it is for you, although it has a London postmark."

Miss Thornhill walked to her seat, and wishing Edna good-morning, stood gazing down at the envelope. The handwriting was quite unfamiliar, but having a suspicion that Lambert Amory might become troublesome after his inexcusable mistake,

Miss Thornhill carried the letter to the window before breaking the seal.

"Ah! you are like me," cried Mrs. Thornhill. "Your eyes are not what they used to be. Any news?" she inquired, as Miss Thornhill read the few lines, refolded the notepaper, and put the letter in her pocket.

"Oh, dear, no!" was the answer. "Nothing of the least importance."

Edna's eyes were fixed on her face as she took her place at the breakfast table and began what usually proved to be a substantial meal.

"What," asked Mrs. Thornhill, limiting herself to toast, "are we all going to do this morning?"

"You remember, mother, I promised to help Agatha choose a wall-paper, and she said she would give me some luncheon."

"And I," exclaimed Miss Thornhill, "thought of spending an hour at Hertford House."

"Really," said Mrs. Thornhill, "I wonder you don't live there. I should like to understand how you can spend so much time looking at pictures day after day. I might go with you, on my way to Clara's," she suggested, feeling that she was, perhaps, neglecting everybody but Mrs. Robbins just now.

"My dear," was the answer, "you would be simply bored to death. Besides, you will like to get to Clara's early this morning, you know."

When Mrs. Thornhill rose from the table, leaving the room for the usual interview with the cook, Miss Thornhill, without speaking, took Lambert's letter out of her pocket and passed it across to Edna, who kept it long enough to have read the brief contents many times.

"Are you going?" she asked, suddenly raising her eyes.

"I really haven't the strength of mind to stay away," was the answer. "Mr. Amory is scarcely the man to be put off with impunity. If I don't go to him he will probably come to me."

Edna put the letter back in its envelope and returned it to her aunt; then resting an elbow on the cloth, she sat for some minutes with her chin on her palm, staring at her teacup.

"Aunt Edna!" she cried.

"Well, dear?"

"What—what——"

"What method do I intend to adopt with this persistent person?" said Miss Thornhill.

"Yes," returned Edna anxiously.

Miss Thornhill seemed to hesitate, not as to her

treatment of Lambert Amory, for about this her mind was already made up. The question was whether she should tell Edna beforehand how she meant to act. But above everything, Miss Thornhill dreaded a "scene." It seemed obvious that Edna was in a highly wrought condition this morning, which could scarcely be wondered at, after last night's experience at Lady Appleton's dance. A little thing would serve to break her down, and in that event there might be trouble with Mrs. Thornhill, who, until the present, had never entertained the remotest suspicion of any connection, however innocent, between her daughter and Alfred Chichester.

"One thing, at least, is certain," said Miss Thornhill, "there must be no further misunderstanding."

"Shall you come straight home after you have seen Mr. Amory?" asked Edna.

"Anyhow, you will have started to Miss Brownlow's."

"Oh, but I need not," was the answer. "Mother is almost certain to spend the whole day with Clara. You might be back by twelve."

"Well, I shall not promise," said Miss Thornhill, rising from her chair, and presently she set out

to Hertford House in time to be only a few minutes late for her appointment. Lambert was assuredly not likely to be behind time. Although he felt confident that at last he had arrived at the facts concerning Edna, his eagerness to hear them confirmed by Miss Thornhill was intense.

No one, however, would have judged from his demeanour that anything extraordinary was passing in his mind, as he paced slowly to and fro in front of the "Laughing Cavalier." As usual, he was dressed with inconspicuous neatness, his dark-grey frock coat fitting his slender, high-shouldered figure with scarcely a crease, his black necktie being precisely arranged. His broad-browed, short-chinned face had a perfectly tranquil expression, and when he saw Miss Thornhill enter the gallery he went to meet her in an unhurried way, lifting his tall hat and offering a hand.

"Now, don't you think it rather gracious of me to respond so readily?" she demanded, with a trace of antagonism in her voice as she remembered the nature of his misconception.

"I assure you I am properly grateful," said Lambert.

"I certainly had an idea that you were more discriminating," she insisted. "You seem to have made

a fairly complete mess of things. It appears you told Sir Hugo a half truth—— But there," she added, as he showed signs of interrupting, "we won't have any apologies or explanations."

"It is in the hope of an explanation I begged you to meet me," urged Lambert. "For everybody's sake surely it has become desirable."

"Is anyone but Sir Hugo concerned?" demanded Miss Thornhill.

Lambert was able to meet her eyes without flinching, and she wished he were more prone to self-betrayal. The next instant, however, Miss Thornhill certainly succeeded in startling him.

"I suppose," she suggested, "you know where to find Mrs. Chichester?"

"Mrs. Chichester!" he exclaimed, completely taken aback.

"Do you know where she lives?"

"Why, yes. She lives in Hoyle Road, Brondesbury."

"Then I advise you to go to Brondesbury as soon as possible. See Mrs. Chichester, and ask her to tell you all she knows."

"About—about Edna?" cried Lambert, not yet quite recovered from his astonishment at the introduction of Marion's name.

"When you have heard and digested her information——"

"Do you know Mrs. Chichester?" he interrupted.

"I have never seen the woman in my life. I never wish to see her. Pray do not attempt to cross-examine me, Mr. Amory. Go to Mrs. Chichester, and then perhaps it will be as well to come to me for the sake of dotting the i's and crossing the t's."

"When may I come?" he asked, drawing a deep breath.

"At half-past four this afternoon, if you should have finished with Mrs. Chichester by that time. Ask for Mrs. Thornhill, as usual, although I hope that she and Edna will both be out. If either of them has returned, we must simply wait for another opportunity."

She gave him her hand in token of dismissal, and five minutes after his departure herself left Hertford House, intending to walk back to Grandison Street. Miss Thornhill, however, remembered that Edna had hinted at awaiting her return, and accordingly she hailed a hansom.

"Has Mrs. Thornhill gone to Portland Place?" she inquired on entering the house.

"Half an hour ago," was the answer.

"And Miss Thornhill?"

"Miss Thornhill is in her room, miss."

Edna, however, wearing her hat in readiness to set out to Agatha Brownlow's, met her aunt on the stairs, and they went into the drawing-room together.

Miss Thornhill glanced searchingly at the pale, wistful face, and suddenly taking Edna's arm, stooped to kiss her cheek.

"For a really inquisitive person as I am," murmured Miss Thornhill, "I certainly do refrain from questioning you in the most admirable manner."

"Did—did you see Mr. Amory?" faltered Edna, clinging to her aunt. She was eagerly responsive to anything of the nature of a caress just now.

"Oh dear, yes, and one might as well have seen the man in the iron mask for all one could learn from his face."

"Were you anxious to—to learn anything?" asked Edna.

"I warn you," said Miss Thornhill abruptly, "you will wince when you hear what I have done. But I feel certain it was the wisest thing—I sent him to Mrs. Chichester!"

Edna drew away, standing a yard off, gazing

into Miss Thornhill's face with something resembling terror in her own.

"Oh, why did you do that?" she cried.

"My dear child," Miss Thornhill explained, "we have got things into such a hopeless muddle between us that I came to the conclusion the only desirable plan was to send this very earnest inquirer to the fountain-head."

"I seem," answered Edna, covering her face with her hands for a moment, "to be drinking the very dregs of humiliation."

"Still," suggested her aunt, "you must dig deep for a foundation if you wish to build securely——"

"To build!" exclaimed Edna, lowering her hands. "To build what?"

"Now, you ask me a question which only yourself can answer," said Miss Thornhill. "For my part, I confess, I am very much in the dark. Mr. Amory misled Sir Hugo in the first place; you misled him afterwards in the opposite direction. You told him you wrote those letters, but it was unfair to yourself—to him, also—to stop there."

"How—how could I possibly go on?" asked Edna.

"You see," Miss Thornhill continued, "the

thought occurred to me that my word might not be implicitly believed——"

"By Mr. Amory?"

"It might be imagined," she said, disregarding the interruption, "that I was merely endeavouring to—well, to shield you. No one could suspect Mrs. Chichester of a similar desire——"

"How she must loathe and despise me!" murmured Edna.

"Well, if so, her evidence will appear the more convincing. I think you must admit I have taken the wisest course," said Miss Thornhill.

"But the idea of his hearing what—what she can tell him!" cried Edna.

"After all," was the answer, "you do no good to exaggerate the evil. Confess that, when once it is over, you will feel thankful that both Mr. Amory and Sir Hugo know the actual, bare, unvarnished truth."

Edna's only answer was a sigh, and a moment later she left the room, intending to set out to King's Cross without loss of time. But Miss Thornhill stood by one of the drawing-room windows, apparently lost in thought, long after her niece had gone, wondering whether or not she had misunderstood Edna from the outset.

CHAPTER XXIV

AT BRONDESBURY

LAMBERT AMORY would have taken a cab direct from Hertford House to Hoyle Road but for the fact that Hugo was waiting in Manchester Street to hear the result of the interview with Miss Thornhill.

After a restless night, Hugo had opened his eyes on what he knew was likely to prove a troublous day. For some years now he had lived a regular, circumspect, busy life, without any very great difficulty in following the course which seemed right. A man of commonplace thoughts and emotions, with an undoubtedly narrow outlook, he had the most ardent desire to do well according to his lights.

But now, for once, he was finding it hard to make what yet he deemed a necessary sacrifice. He could not whole-heartedly accept Lambert's most recent explanation of Edna's conduct. To Hugo it

had been comparatively easy to believe that she had refused to marry the man she loved rather than expose her aunt. He found it, however, far more difficult to realise that, having written those letters which Lambert had described, as he knew by her own admission she had done, Edna had, as if by a miracle, gone no farther. Hugo had last night inclined rather to the notion that Miss Thornhill had made a well-intended but inexcusable effort to shield her niece, who, with admirable courage, had refused to avail herself of such a subterfuge.

And this was Hugo's difficulty: there was so much that appeared admirable about Edna! He could not tolerate the prospect of putting her absolutely out of his life, especially as he was beginning to have the glimmering of a suspicion that she might subsequently enter Lambert Amory's. Because if the one man refrained from coming forward again, the other stood to gain a powerful prestige, which in time might lead to success.

On the whole, Hugo left Bryanston Square this morning in anything rather than a tranquil state of mind. In the first place, there was the question whether Lambert would be in a position to verify his theory (and nothing must be taken for granted) that the intrigue had ended with the writing of the

letters. Granting that Amory could prove so much, then Hugo must determine whether their authorship alone was not an insurmountable disqualification.

He could not put from his mind the idea that, in the circumstances, Edna might eagerly seize the opportunity of getting married. He did her the justice to believe she would have lived and died unmarried rather than deceive her husband, but now that the whole affair was going to be explained she might rejoice to begin a new epoch. Failing to realise the possibility that he might have already hurt her pride beyond recovery, Hugo, in fact, believed she would marry him if he persisted, whereas the temptation seemed to grow stronger every instant.

Reaching Lambert's rooms before his return from Hertford House, Hugo began to pace backwards and forwards between the door and the fireplace until he heard the latch-key turned in the lock.

As Lambert entered the room Hugo abruptly confronted him, but it was not necessary to ask a single question. In a voice of suppressed excitement Amory explained what had taken place.

"But," he added, "where in the world Marion Chichester comes in is more than I can imagine."

"Unfortunately," answered Hugo, "I shall not be free till about five——"

"You see," explained Lambert, "I have an appointment with Miss Thornhill at half-past four. Come as soon as you can, and you shall hear the complete history up to date."

They parted on the doorstep, Lambert taking a hansom to Hoyle Road, the sun shining by the way, the lilac trees in full bloom in the suburban front gardens. In Mrs. Chichester's a laburnum was coming into flower. She opened the door in person, wearing a blue silk handkerchief arranged as a turban to protect her hair.

"I am sure I must look very untidy," she said, with an air of apology, but he brought a smile to her face by protesting that her headgear was extremely becoming. Compliments were rare in these days.

"The fact is," said Lambert, "I wish to speak to you——"

"There's nothing gone wrong!" she exclaimed, but he assured her that everything connected with the estate was in a satisfactory condition.

"Did you ever," he asked, when she had taken him to the seldom used drawing-room, "hear the name of Thornhill?" She shook her head with an

expression of bewilderment. "Edna Thornhill?" he insisted, and now a light broke over her face.

"Edna—yes," she answered. "But it was years and years ago."

"Tell me just what you know about her," he urged.

"Oh, please," she cried, "don't ask me to reopen a painful chapter of my life!"

"You must understand that I found amongst Alfred's papers some letters——"

"They were not in the box!" said Mrs. Chichester reproachfully.

"I took the responsibility of destroying them, but I know Edna Thornhill. It was not," exclaimed Lambert, "through her that your separation was brought about?" He waited with consuming eagerness for her reply.

"No," she admitted, "that did not take place until a year later. But I was bitterly jealous of that girl! I led an unhappy life; there was always somebody. Alfred was careless—as if he didn't mind whether I knew or not. He left all manner of things in his pockets, and, well, I suppose I played the spy. One day I found a letter signed 'Edna' —just that; no surname. As usual, it had been addressed to the theatre. I gathered they had made

an appointment, though I had few details. She referred to the coming Thursday—Alfred was resting at the time."

"But," exclaimed Lambert, "she did not meet him!"

"Oh, yes, she met him," was the answer.

"Are you quite certain about that?" asked Amory, moistening his lips.

"Absolutely certain."

"Where?" he demanded, almost sternly.

"At Redhill station."

"Did she travel in the train from Brighton?"

"Yes," said Marion, and Lambert became moodily silent.

"You had them followed?" he suggested presently.

"Yes," she said again. "Oh, yes, they were followed."

Lambert rose, taking his hat from the chair at his side.

"Is that all you have to tell me?" he asked.

"All," said Marion. "You don't look very well this morning," she added.

He at least felt extremely bewildered, as he marvelled why Miss Thornhill had sent him to Mrs. Chichester. The impression she created seemed

the worse because he had been able to hope for a few hours that Edna's reputation would prove to be untarnished. Of course it might be that Miss Thornhill's notion of "fitness" differed from Hugo Warbrook's, for instance. Or could it be possible that Marion had another "Edna" in her mind, although in that case why had Edna Thornhill admitted responsibility for the letters?

"I hoped," answered Lambert, "to hear a rather different story."

"You feel an interest in the girl—I suppose it must be the same."

"What was she like?" asked Amory eagerly.

"I don't know how to describe her," was the answer. "She was pretty—beautiful, perhaps; you feel an interest in her?" she repeated.

"The deepest. And," continued Lambert, "I must tell you this. Whatever mistake she may have made, she remains a—a good woman. Do you understand me? I have the greatest regard—respect for her, and always shall have."

"Why should I say a word for her?" cried Marion, apparently still in doubt.

"Because you also are a good woman!" She had never heard him speak in this way before, but at least he was deeply in earnest.

"I don't feel particularly good," she answered, gratified, nevertheless. "But you have acted splendidly to me! It's not so much anything you've done as the way you've treated me since Alfred's death. You made me feel I had just one friend left."

"For God's sake!" urged Lambert, "tell me what you are keeping in the background!"

"It isn't so much after all. I was horribly jealous when I read that letter," she explained. "I felt I could give anything to punish them both, and I dogged Alfred's steps. He thought I was a poor submissive creature who would put up with anything. But I followed him out of the house, and when he took a cab I got into another. We went to Victoria, and I saw him pass through the gate to the Brighton train. I ran back for a ticket, and though I thought he was going all the way to Brighton, I looked out each time we stopped. You see, he hadn't told me he was going anywhere; he seldom did. When he wasn't acting he would go away for days together, sometimes sending a telegram, sometimes not. I was nothing to him, though we still lived in the same house and met at the breakfast table. When," Marion continued, "we reached Redhill, I saw him on the platform, and the next minute, as I got out, he saw me."

Mrs. Chichester paused for a few minutes, taking out a pocket handkerchief, which she passed over her face.

"You remember his calm way?" she said. "He could always muster a smile, whatever might be in his mind. I never recollect hearing a really angry word from him, and even that afternoon he lifted his hat and said, 'Well, Polly!' just as if he wasn't feeling mad with me."

"What did you do?" asked Lambert.

"I wasn't so clever at keeping up appearances," she admitted, "but I didn't mean to leave him, whatever happened. Our train had gone on, and when Alfred crossed to the opposite platform I stuck close to his side. Then the up train came in," she explained, "and he took off his felt hat—how plainly I can see him, standing there in his light-grey suit. There was never a handsomer man! 'Look here, Polly,' he said, 'I wish to goodness you would chuck it!' I remember his exact words. But I stood beside him while the passengers got out, and when the rest had cleared away and the train went on, a girl stayed behind."

"Edna!" muttered Lambert under his breath.

"You see," continued Marion, "I was a good deal surprised. She wasn't the kind I expected.

They were generally married women, you know, but this was a fresh-looking schoolgirl. She didn't look seventeen. She wore her hair in a loop and was simply dressed; expensively, but simply. I felt terribly ashamed of Alfred then. She carried a small drab bag and a tennis racquet; there was a larger leather case by her side on the platform, and she was as—as white as you are now. Whether she had spoken to him before, or only seen him on the stage, I couldn't tell," said Mrs. Chichester, "but finding he wasn't alone, I suppose she couldn't bring herself to come forward. Alfred was quite at a loss for once. It would have made a good situation for one of the farces he used to act in, wouldn't it?" she suggested.

"Upon my word," cried Lambert, "it doesn't make me feel like laughing."

"Neither did I at the time," she said, with tears in her eyes. "And it all seems to come back so plainly: that child—really she wasn't more—standing there alone; Alfred at his wits' end, and I feeling I could push her on to the line and see her run over without remorse. I went towards her," continued Marion, "though Alfred put out his hand and tried to prevent me. 'For goodness' sake, don't let us have a scene!' he said—so like a man! But I

wanted to humiliate them both. 'I think,' I exclaimed, 'you are waiting for my husband!' I had been on the stage, you know! She was struggling to keep back her tears, but still she had plenty of courage," Marion admitted.

"Well?" suggested Lambert as she paused.

"She managed to pull herself together," said Marion. "It may be I had brought her to her senses and made her realise what she was doing. Anyhow, she looked into my face. 'I am waiting for Mr. Chichester,' she said. 'Well,' I answered, 'Mr. Chichester is my husband, and he's here!' She stood looking from Alfred to me and from me to him. He muttered something I couldn't hear, but still there was a smile on his lips. A man may smile and smile and be a villain, you know. 'The best thing you can do,' I told the girl, 'is to get straight back to your friends, and when you go to bed to-night thank God for a lucky escape.' She must have hated me," cried Marion, "but I was just the best friend she ever had, though I didn't want to be. I took Alfred's arm and led him away to the refreshment room. At first he refused to come back to London with me, but I told him I shouldn't leave him wherever he went, and at last, after an hour or more, he gave way. You may

imagine we had a pleasant time. He was too much crushed to leave the house again till he went to rehearsal on Monday. But he amused himself with the children—they were always immensely fond of him."

"What became of—of Edna?" asked Lambert.

"Goodness knows. I didn't see her again. When we came out of the refreshment room there was no sign of her. I don't even know whether she met him later on."

"Well, thank you very much," exclaimed Lambert, rising and taking his hat again. She accompanied him across the hall to the street door, where she gave her hand in silence, having sympathy enough to understand that he was not in a mood for further conversation.

CHAPTER XXV

A RETROSPECT

MISS THORNHILL hoped sincerely that her sister-in-law would not return from Portland Place until after Lambert Amory's visit to Grandison Street at half-past four. She wished to add what seemed desirable to the explanation which he would doubtless succeed in obtaining from Mrs. Chichester, and then to wash her hands of the affair. So that she rejoiced when at half-past one Mrs. Thornhill rang her up on the telephone to say that she would probably spend the rest of the day with Mrs. Robbins.

Now the coast was clear for Lambert, who arrived a few minutes before the appointed time, shook hands without a word, placed his hat on the octagonal table, deliberately unbuttoned his frock coat, and took a chair.

"Well, did you see Mrs. Chichester?" asked Miss Thornhill, with her eyes on his face.

"Yes," was the monosyllabic answer.

"It happened," Miss Thornhill continued, "that I was staying in London at the time——"

"Here?" asked Lambert.

"No—fortunately. I had put up at the Westmoreland Hotel. You can understand that Edna found herself in a quandary."

"After parting from the Chichesters at Redhill, you mean?"

"Yes," said Miss Thornhill. "She was not expected home until the following day; she could not very well return to Joan, with whose people she had been staying at Brighton."

"So," Lambert suggested, "she went to your hotel?"

"Happily she had sense enough for that!" exclaimed Miss Thornhill. "She came to me direct from Victoria station. You may imagine my horror when, without the least attempt at disguise or excuse, she—child as she was—told me what she had been doing."

Lambert uncrossed his legs and drew a deep breath.

"Not," Miss Thornhill continued, "that you must picture a very emotional scene. Edna had experienced an awakening. Nothing could have

been more thorough. She was perfectly calm—matter of fact, but quite different from what she had ever been before. Indeed," said Miss Thornhill, "she has never appeared the same since. Strange to be talking in this way of my niece, is it not?" she demanded—"of the dear girl we both know. She had to thank Mrs. Chichester for a terribly narrow escape; for the great lesson of her life. She stayed with me that night, and on parting the next morning we made a compact that the affair should never again be mentioned even between ourselves. Her mother little suspected that she had not come direct from Brighton that day."

Miss Thornhill's eyes had not once left Lambert's face during this explanation, but she might as well have stared at a brick wall for all its expression told her. Yet he struck her as being unlike himself; preoccupied, chary of words, even for him.

"Mr. Amory," she cried, after a brief silence, "I can understand that Mrs. Chichester's story has left a bad taste in your mouth. But I have tried to believe you were the kind of man who would understand——"

"Understand?" he said.

"Something of the purlieus of the human heart and mind—even of the best. I sometimes look

back and wonder from which of her forebears Edna inherited that—well, that capacity. What I should like you to realise is that there was just the one speck on an otherwise flawless surface. From you is it too much to expect what one might call a literary judgment?"

"Is my opinion of any importance?" he demanded.

"For instance," she continued, shrugging her shoulders slightly at the question, "you would not estimate a poet by his worst verse, would you? Half a dozen beautiful lines, even, would place him amongst the elect. It would be absurd to tell me that Edna isn't—well, one of the best. I suppose," cried Miss Thornhill abruptly, "you intend to tell Sir Hugo all you have heard?"

"I am going to meet him now," said Lambert, rising from his chair. He took his hat and walked to the door, Miss Thornhill observing that he had forgotten to offer his hand or say a word of farewell. He went slowly downstairs, where the butler was waiting to let him out to the street, on reaching which Lambert made his way to the corner, and turning it, came face to face with Edna.

She had set out to Ashbourne Street, King's Cross, in a mood almost more anxious than any she

had experienced since the day she heard of Alfred Chichester's death, and that is to say much. Now that she knew of Lambert Amory's journey to Brondesbury the recollection of that humiliating encounter at Redhill grew so vivid that she seemed to live through the terrible ordeal afresh—and to endure it, as it were, under Lambert's eyes.

There had never been the slightest fear of her yielding to Chichester's petition for a second appointment. Her danger lay in the opposite direction; that she should come to despise herself too completely on account of the first. For life is not possible without a modicum of self-esteem.

The existence of those letters, however, scarcely troubled her during Chichester's lifetime; she seemed in a manner to have risen superior to any such consideration; the fate of the letters was as nothing compared with the lamentable fact that she could have fallen so low as to write them.

But at the time of his death she began to wonder whether they had been kept or destroyed, and presently she learned that Chichester's executor was Lambert Amory, the most intimate friend of Sir Hugo Warbrook, in whom she felt a certain amount of interest. She could not be blind to the fact that he was paying her marked attention, and, in-

deed, Mrs. Thornhill's suggestions were alone enough to open Edna's eyes.

She had enough scrupulosity to believe that the penance of her backsliding must be perpetual maidenhood: not a very severe penance so far. She could not marry without some reference to that episode, she often told herself, whereas any fate in the world seemed preferable.

Yet she liked Sir Hugo, and understanding that Mr. Amory would probably know that Sir Hugo liked her, Edna began to think about Lambert even before the meeting at Mrs. Thwaites' dance. There was no trustworthy evidence that her letters had not come under his notice, in which event he would naturally draw the worst conclusion. She interrogated Sir Hugo, endeavouring to find out whether Lambert Amory had referred to any collection of Chichester's correspondence, as subsequently she questioned the executor in person.

It was now that her more acute anxiety awakened—because Sir Hugo's chances, if they can be said ever to have existed, were at an end. Henceforth there was only one man of whom she could ever dream as a husband; whereas he, for all she could tell, might deem her utterly unworthy. Edna set herself to discover the extent of his informa-

tion, employing every artifice she knew, with the result that she became convinced that Lambert was absolutely ignorant and unsuspecting of her relationship to Alfred Chichester.

That she should have arrived at this opinion was scarcely to be marvelled at, considering that he had done his utmost (assisted, no doubt, by a singularly impassive, self-contained manner) to lead her to believe that he knew no more than the rest of the world. Having once arrived at this satisfactory conclusion, Edna experienced the greatest happiness of her life. Sometimes, it is true, a reaction set in, and she shuddered to look forward to the time when Lambert should ask her to marry him.

For the first time she had met a man who seemed worth the ordeal of an explanation. Hitherto she had preferred to keep her secret, but now she determined to humiliate herself by a confession rather than send Lambert away. The fact that he appeared to regard her with favour was surely confirmatory evidence of his ignorance.

Confident in her immunity, Edna had not hesitated to hint at her innermost feelings when alone with Lambert, as if to enable herself to form an opinion about his reception of a possible explana-

tion. More and more she believed that she should find it necessary. Was he the kind of man who would turn his back upon her in consequence? Would he be able to understand and to forgive?

Then on the morning after the theatre party occurred her great disillusioning. She knew now that he had seen the letters she had written during that bout of (surely) madness five years ago. Henceforth Edna knew nothing faintly resembling happiness.

Without any intention that her explanation, if she were ever required to make it, as she had certainly hoped, should be less than complete, she perceived that it was a vastly different thing that Lambert should have actually read the letters. No man could have read them without coming to a definite conclusion, and, having read them, was it conceivable that he would accept her explanation?

He could scarcely have let her down more gently. She understood his desire to spare her, whilst yet it seemed ridiculous that he should exaggerate in this way her interest in Sir Hugo. At the least, Lambert must feel doubtful whether she intended to accept Sir Hugo or not; doubtful, also, whether she meant in the first place to enlighten him concerning

Alfred Chichester. And from his own point of view Lambert appeared justified in his intervention.

No wonder that Miss Thornhill found her low-spirited. The man whose regard was the most coveted thing on earth must despise her. Whilst realising that she deserved contempt, she yet quailed under what was almost a sense of injustice, because, after all, Lambert's conclusions were mistaken.

How she had faced him in the Row that morning she had ridden with Joan and Willoughby Franks; how she had been able to abstain from galloping out of his sight on that first meeting after the interview in Portland Place, Edna never understood. But by degrees she came under the influence of a fresh hope. He imagined worse than the fact, and yet he did not turn his back upon her. By no means given to humble-mindedness, Edna began to experience a feeling resembling gratitude. Again she tried to realise the possibility of joining her life to his, until she became once more cast down on discovering her aunt's intervention.

That seemed steadily to refocus her mind on the hateful letters, and she perceived that Lambert was now driven to the opposite extreme, and that instead of thinking too badly of her he thought too well. Her sympathy was acute, her imagina-

tion active. At the outset he had known the worst and there could be no disillusioning, but at present he overexalted her, and disappointment must lie in store.

But the worst moment, perhaps, was when she heard that Miss Thornhill had sent him to Mrs. Chichester, who would scarcely spare her. Lambert would see her in the most odious, humiliating, even ridiculous aspect. After Mrs. Chichester's description could he ever feel a moment's respect for her again?

Agatha Brownlow found her *distraite* and preoccupied that afternoon, and the wall-papers failed to awaken the slightest interest. Edna knew that Lambert was expected at Grandison Street at half-past four. Without the least desire to meet him at present, she longed to hear how he had taken Mrs. Chichester's communication, and with this object she hastened her return home.

On approaching the corner of the street, walking rapidly, she suddenly saw Lambert, but never had his face looked so grave. His eyes were bent upon the pavement, and he did not raise them until Edna was within a few feet. Even then she wondered whether he intended to stop.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE LAST

EDNA was the first to come to a standstill.

"You gave me the impression," she exclaimed, "that your thoughts were miles away."

He took her proffered hand, gazing down, sorrowfully, she thought, into her eyes.

"They were not very far from here," he answered.

"I—I thought you meant to pass me by," she suggested.

"One of the least likely things in the world," said Lambert.

There was certainly something unusual in his manner, and she wished ardently to know whether the change was caused by his interview with Mrs. Chichester.

"Well, it must be 'How do you do, and goodbye,' " she murmured.

"Oh, but you must let me walk back with you."

"Isn't it a pity to take you out of your way?" she asked.

"You understand that is already done," returned Lambert, turning the corner by her side.

"Do you blame me for that?" she cried impulsively.

"For nothing; why should I dream of blaming you?" he demanded.

"Such perfect tolerance seems to suggest as complete a lack of interest," said Edna.

"Or it might be put down to sympathy," he suggested.

"Good-bye again," she exclaimed, stopping next door to Number 7.

"You must let me finish the journey," he insisted.

"A rather short one now, Mr. Amory."

"Would to God it might be longer!" he said, in little above a whisper.

"When," she asked timorously, "are you coming to see us again?"

"My plans are a little uncertain——"

"Are you going away?" she cried.

"That is the question."

"It seems unlike you to hesitate," she suggested.

"Oh, well, no doubt I am undergoing fresh experiences," he answered.

"Then," she said, looking suddenly into his face, "you intend to seek the everlasting hills?"

"If I have to go away at all," he returned.

"Surely you long to reach them?"

"On the contrary," said Lambert, "my chief desire at present is to stay where I am."

"You mustn't go," she insisted, "without saying good-bye." Then stepping towards her own door, she rang the bell. Turning to bestow upon Lambert a final nod of farewell, Edna entered the hall and ran swiftly upstairs to the drawing-room, where she found Miss Thornhill alone.

"Aunt Edna!" she exclaimed eagerly. "Has—has Mr. Amory seen Mrs. Chichester?"

"Oh dear, yes," was the answer.

"Then he—he knows——"

"Everything," said Miss Thornhill, and Edna incontinently burst into tears. "Though," her aunt added, "why you should be sorry I cannot quite understand."

"I—I don't think I am," faltered Edna. "Only—only terribly ashamed——"

"At the prospect of breaking your word?"

"Breaking my word——"

"My dear child, how many times have you bothered your poor mother by protesting you intended to follow my lamentable example, and die an old maid!"

As soon as possible Edna went to her own room, trying to assure herself that Lambert's regard had, after all, survived Mrs. Chichester's recital. Yet why had he hinted at going away? Was it possible that he still entertained some lingering doubt concerning her attitude towards Sir Hugo? Could Lambert be obtuse enough to fear a refusal if he should ask her to become his wife? Yet why had he suggested going abroad?

Whilst Edna was trying to satisfy her mind Lambert was doing his utmost to put Sir Hugo Warbrook in possession of the actual state of affairs.

"The whole thing is perfectly simple at last," said Lambert, standing with his back to the empty fireplace, his hands in his trousers pockets, whilst Hugo was leaning against the dining table. "Edna, at the age of sixteen or seventeen, became infatuated with Chichester, whom she had seen only on the stage. She was childishly misguided enough to write to him; was persuaded to meet him."

"Did the meeting actually take place?" demanded Hugo.

"Yes; but Marion had found a letter, and, to make a long story short, she followed Chichester; so that three turned up instead of two."

"What a horrible situation!" exclaimed Hugo.

"Useless to take too tragic a view of it," said Lambert, "especially as it tended to an anti-climax. Edna stayed with Miss Thornhill that night, whilst Marion took care of her husband. So, you see," added Amory, "the whole thing ends in smoke."

"Ah, yes, but smoke may show how the wind blows!"

"Then," suggested Lambert, "suppose you light up."

"What do you mean?" demanded Hugo.

"I should rather like to know what you are going to do."

Hugo folded his arms whilst a dogged expression came on his face. "After all," he muttered, "the matter rests between me and Edna——"

"Still," retorted Lambert, "it can't be allowed to rest for ever."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Hugo. "I could never have believed it possible!"

"There's surely not much left to test your faith," said Lambert.

"Upon my word, it has had a disastrous blow," cried Hugo.

"What I wish you would tell me," Lambert insisted, "is whether you are likely to recover from it."

"You see," said Hugo, passing a hand over his forehead, and looking, as he felt, extremely downcast, "a girl who could write those letters at seventeen——"

"Don't you understand," exclaimed Lambert, "that youth was her best excuse?"

"What is bred in the bone——"

Lambert's forehead puckered, and he took his hands from his pockets, only to put them in again the next moment.

"Ah, yes, but we don't set a person down as irrevocably ill-bred because of one *gaucherie*. Even you were not always the man you are."

"I'm little enough to boast of, heaven knows," was the answer.

"Not in the way of magnanimity, perhaps," said Lambert.

"Look here, my dear fellow," cried Hugo, resting a finger for a moment on Amory's shoulder. "I feel there's something in what you say. It's not that I would throw a stone, but two wrongs don't

make a right. Good heaven! don't you understand that I would do almost anything to convince myself it would be right to marry Edna? This is how I look at it. I believe honestly she has striven to conquer herself, probably with some success. But it can't be denied there's that flaw in her character——"

"Then," said Lambert, evidently putting a strong check on himself, "in spite of all your protestations, when it comes to the point, there is to be no forgiveness?"

"Amory, old man, it isn't a question of forgiveness. That isn't for me or you. But I have to think of my future—of the children who might be born to me. I should never feel safe."

"Safe from what—in heaven's name?"

"Oh, well," muttered Hugo, and Lambert turned his back, touching the cigarettes on the mantel-shelf, although he did not take one.

"What became of that girl at Oswell's, the florist's?" he asked quietly, as he faced about again; and Hugo sat down, resting his head on his hands.

"I—I have taken care she has not come to want —it was all I could do."

"How long ago was it——"

"Seven years," answered Hugo.

"Can you conceive the possibility of your acting now as you acted then?"

"No—with God's help."

"Very well, then!"

Hugo rose slowly from his chair, looking about the room for his hat.

"Don't go for a moment," said Lambert. "You haven't told me in as many words what you intend to do. You see," he added, "I wish to make my own position quite plain."

"I think I begin to understand it," answered Hugo.

"No doubt it's a delicate one, to some extent," Lambert explained. "Until now I have stood aside for you. After all, neither of us can actually interfere with the other. If Edna loves you, I stand to lose; if she loves me—— There is," he broke off, "the same punctilio as at Fontenoy: Who shall fire first?"

"You feel able to make light of—of what has happened?" asked Hugo, almost enviously.

"I wish," exclaimed Lambert, with more intense fervour than had ever been seen in him before, "those letters had not been penned, as sincerely as I wish some incidents in my own life had not oc-

curred. If you don't go to Grandison Street to-night," he said emphatically, "I shall."

"I can't," said Hugo, with obvious unwillingness. "I have done."

Taking his hat, he walked to the door, opened it, and passed out to the hall. Lambert, following, let him out of the house, and they parted on the step, not without embarrassment. But if Hugo felt in a manner envious, and certainly crushed by disappointment, he had the consolation of believing that he had, at a considerable cost, chosen the right road. Moreover, he felt fairly confident that for the present, at least, Lambert Amory might sue in vain. Hugo perceived that Edna must henceforth regard him with disapproval; also that Lambert was going to take the most certain way to her favour; but he could not help thinking that if he, instead of Amory, could have seen his way to go to Grandison Street that evening, Edna would promptly have consented to be his wife.

Lambert, however, was more diffident. He longed for the hours to pass which still separated him from the knowledge of his fate. Not that he was by any means entirely without hope, but he could not feel certain, and hence his hint at going

abroad. If Edna would have none of him he must get away.

A few words would put the matter beyond a doubt. Fortunately, there remained no necessity for even the briefest explanation. He trusted that the Chichester letters might never be referred to again, either by himself or Edna, who could not regret them more sincerely than the man who aspired, nevertheless, to be her husband. They might be regarded as a blot which the friction of time had rubbed out.

It was nine o'clock when he reached Grandison Street, and heard that Miss Thornhill and Edna were at home. As the butler announced him they both looked up in unmitigated astonishment.

"I am afraid," said Lambert, "it must be rather a shock to see me again so soon."

"My dear Mr. Amory," exclaimed Miss Thornhill, "I have lived far too long in this delightfully surprising world to be shocked at anything. Besides, you have found us in a moment of rejoicing. Edna has a nephew, and Major Robbins is happy at last."

With that she rose from her chair, and Lambert, delighted to perceive her intention, stepped forward

to open the door. She smiled faintly as she left the room. Instead of sitting down again, he stood with his hands tightly gripping the back of his chair.

"We are all immensely pleased," cried Edna. "My mother rang us up an hour ago with the good news. We expect her home every minute."

Lambert left his position by the chair, crossing the room to Edna's. She rose as he stopped close before it.

"Have you—have you arrived at a decision?" she asked.

"Quite."

"Have you come to say good-bye?"

"That," answered Lambert, "is on the knees of the gods."

"I understood you had made up your mind——"

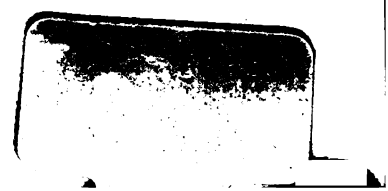
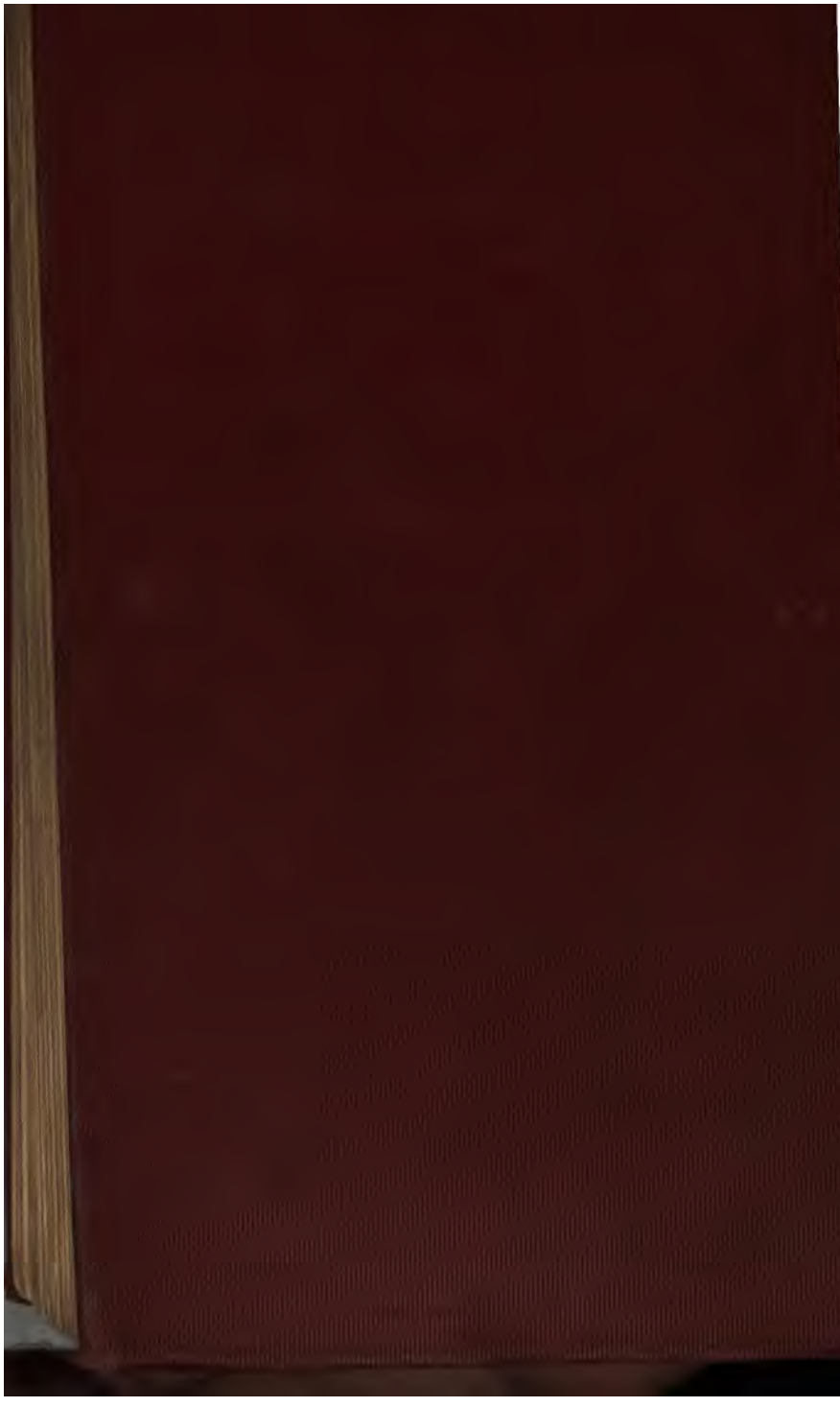
"The more important question is," said Lambert, "whether you can make up yours."

Raising her eyes, Edna now looked into his own.

"Oh!" she cried, throwing out her arms, "what am I to say to you?"

"Edna," he urged, "you know what I am longing to hear. Tell me you will be my wife——"

She put forth a shaking hand, taking the lapel of his evening coat between her fingers.

"May I?" she murmured, and the next instant found herself in Lambert's arms.

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